Bruce Sterling: The Denial

Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

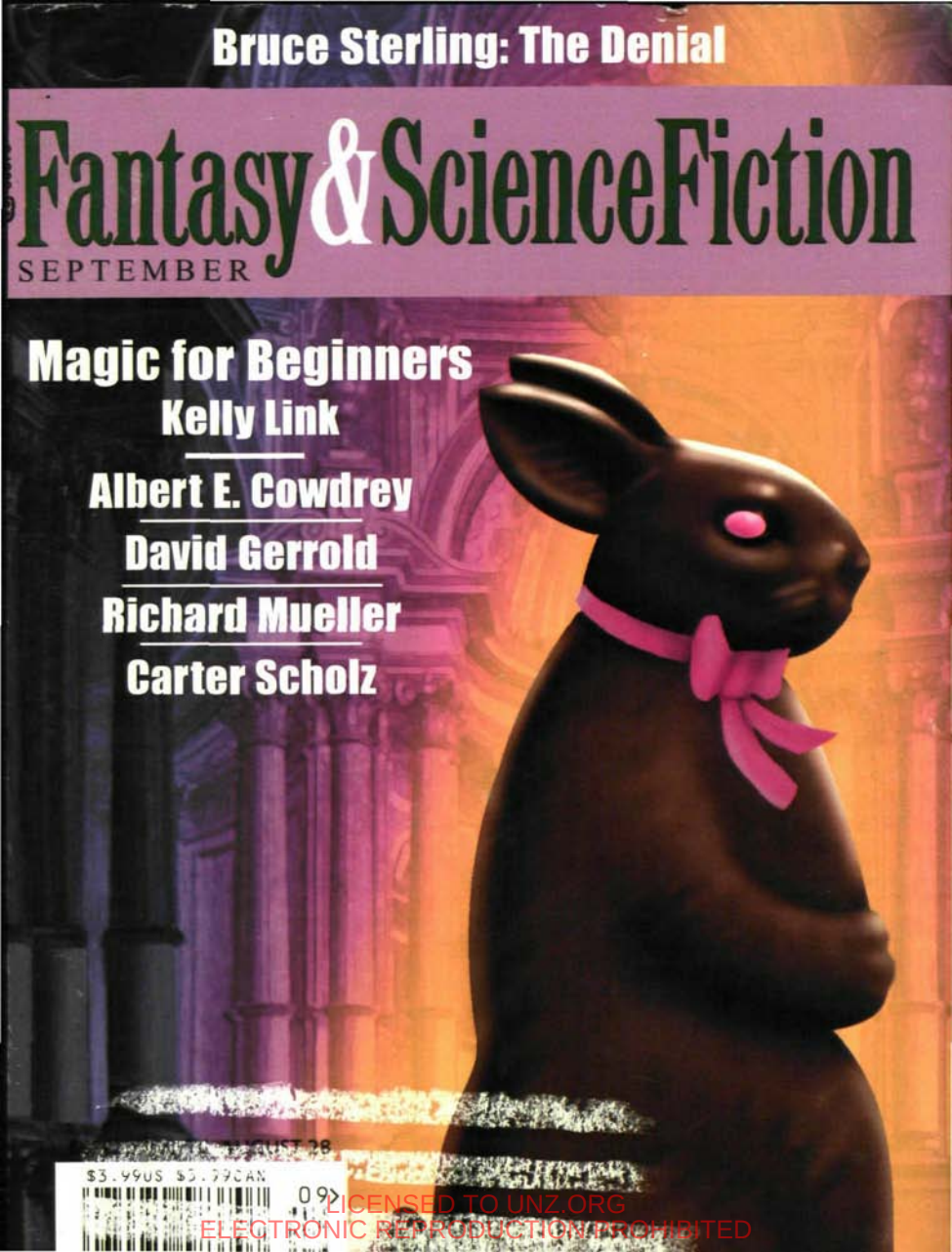
Magic for Beginners
Kelly Link

Albert E. Cowdrey

David Gerrold

Richard Mueller

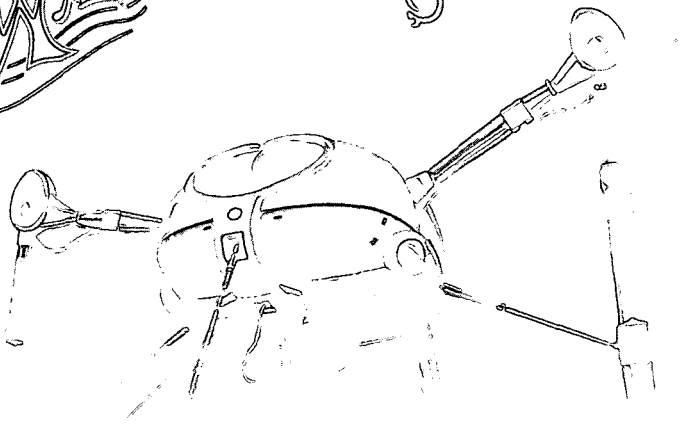
Carter Scholz

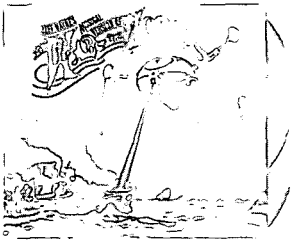


$3.99US $5.79CAN

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

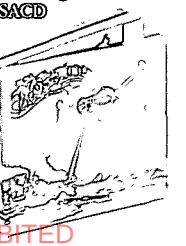
JEFF WAYNE'S MUSICAL VERSION OF THE WAR OF THE WORLDS





The Musical Masterpiece As You've Never Experienced It Before.

- The classic 1978 album completely repackaged as a hybrid SACD two-disc set with 5.1 Surround Sound and new stereo mixes.
- Featuring narration by Richard Burton and musical guests Justin Hayward, David Essex, Thin Lizzy's Phil Lynott, Julie Covington and others.
- Also available as a deluxe 7-disc Limited Collector's Edition Box Set. Featuring the original album in hybrid SACD with 5.1 Surround Sound, plus 4 CDs of remixes, rarities and outtakes. Includes a 65 minute "making of" DVD and an 80 page, full color book.



Available At

BORDERS.

COLUMBIARECORDS.COM

THEWAROFTHEWORLDS.COM

The Ultimate Battle.
The Ultimate Sound.
The Ultimate Collection

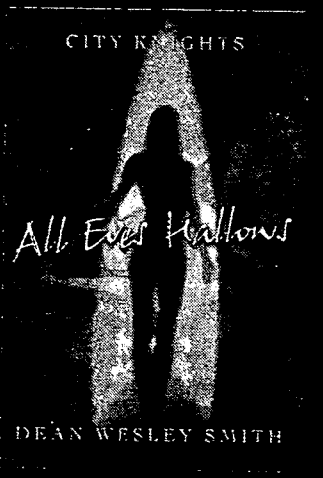
LICENSED TO ECHO.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

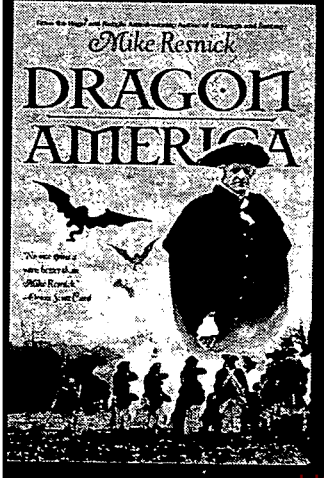
THIS FALL . . .
PHOBOS IMPACT PROUDLY PRESENTS:

All Eve's Hallows
A City Knights Novel
Dean Wesley Smith
Trade Paperback: $12.95: 0-9720026-6-9

On Sale September 16th

Step back, Men In Black, move over, Ghostbusters, here come the *City Knights*!" – Kevin J. Anderson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Saga of the Seven Suns.*





Dragon America
Mike Resnick
Trade Paperback: $13.95: 0-9720026-9-3

On Sale September 23rd

The British are coming and the dragons are waiting for them! The War for Independence bursts out in an alternate America where dragons rule the landscape. From the Hugo and Nebula award winning and author of *Kirinyaga and Santiago.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PHOBOS IMPACT . . . IMPACTING THE IMAGINATION

INNOVATIVE NEW SF FROM TOR

CORY DOCTOROW

Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town

0-765-31278-6
$24.95/$34.95 Can.

Now in hardcover

A miraculous novel of secrets, lies, magic, and technological vision.

"A glorious book, but there are hundreds of those. It is more. It is a glorious book unlike any book you've ever read."

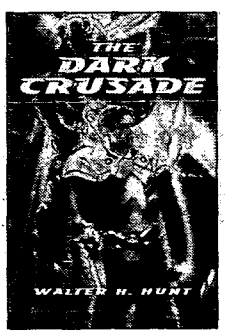
—Gene Wolfe

WALTER H. HUNT

The Dark Crusade

0-765-31117-8
$25.95/$35.95 Can.

Now in hardcover



The fourth book in the Dark Wing series. The alien menace is forced to confront a zor/human alliance. The fate of sentient life in the galaxy will be forever altered....

"[The Dark Wing series] ... may well

GENE WOLFE

Starwater Strains

0-765-31202-6
$25.95/$35.95 Can.

Now in hardcover

Gene Wolfe follows his acclaimed all-fantasy short story collection, *Innocents Aboard*, with a volume devoted primarily to his science fiction.

"Short fiction doesn't often get better

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW FROM ASPECT

THE THRILLING CONCLUSION TO THE DRAGON THRONE SAGA!

In a land where humans live with dragons...

The fate of the Celestial Empire hangs in the balance. The time for the last battle draws near. But can Ailia's growing magic defeat the Dragon Prince Mandrake's dark sorcery when they fight their fated duel?

"A real winner, sure to please current fans and appeal to many new ones."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) on *The Stone of the Stars*

Don't Miss the First Book in the Trilogy—Now in Mass Market Paperback!

"Everything a reader could want in a fantasy."
—Harriet Klausner

AVAILABLE IN TRADE PAPERBACK
Read an Excerpt Online at www.twbookmark.com

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE YOULL

ASPECT
WHERE IMAGINATION KNOWS NO BOUNDS
TIME WARNER BOOK GROUP

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

September • 56th Year of Publication

NOVELLAS

MAGIC FOR BEGINNERS 46 Kelly Link

SHORT STORIES

A QUANTUM BIT EXISTS IN TWO STATES SIMULTANEOUSLY: ON 8 David Gerrold

AGE OF MIRACLES 35 Richard Mueller

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TIME IT WAS 97 Carter Scholz

WHAT I OWE TO RICK 106 Arthur Porges

THE HOUSEWARMING 108 Albert E. Cowdrey

THE DENIAL 133 Bruce Sterling

A QUANTUM BIT EXISTS IN TWO STATES SIMULTANEOUSLY: OFF 150 David Gerrold

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 21 Charles de Lint

BOOKS 25 Robert K.J. Killheffer

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: SOUL MINING 92 Paul Di Filippo

COMING ATTRACTIONS 127

FILMS: OF MICE AND LONG-AWAITED MOVIES 128 Kathi Maio

CURIOSITIES 162 Darrell Schweitzer

CARTOONS: Danny Shanahan (91), J.P. Rini (96), Arthur Masear (105).

COVER: BY MICHAEL GARLAND FOR "A QUANTUM BIT EXISTS IN TWO STATES"

GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor — BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor — KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor — JOHN J. ADAMS, Assistant Editor
CAROL PINCHEFSKY, Contests Editor — JOHN M. CAPPELLO, Newsstand Circulation

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 109, No. 3, Whole No. 643, September 2005. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.99 per copy. Annual subscription $44.89; $54.89 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2005 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.

Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.

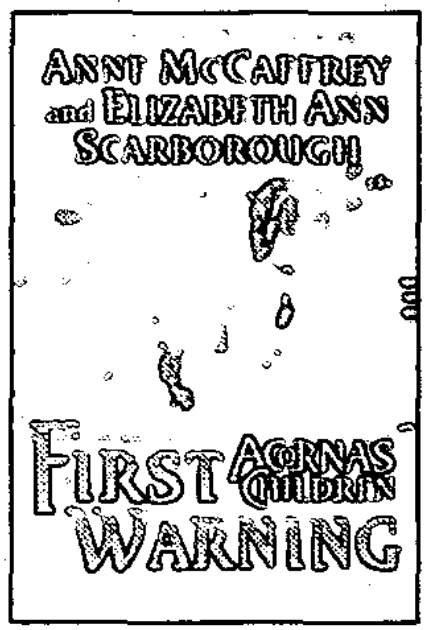
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030

www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

First Warning

Acorna's Children



An exciting new science fiction series based on the popular Acorna books.

Ann McCaffrey and
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough
ISBN 0-06-052538-X
$24.95 ($32.95 Can.)
Hardcover

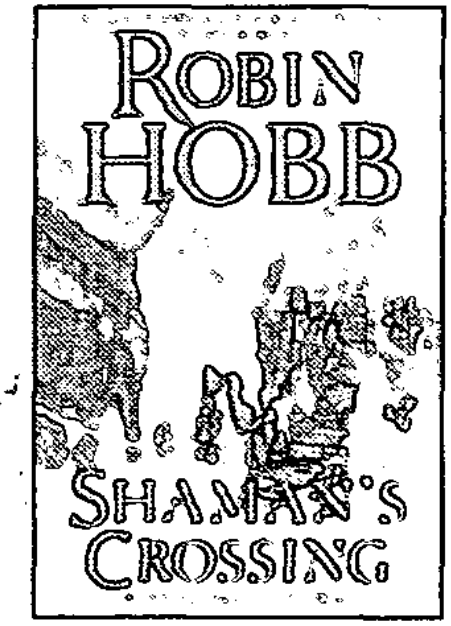
Radiant

"Filled with believably flawed, emotionally involving characters, this entertaining novel...thoughtfully explores the questions of honor, culpability and the price of survival."
—Publishers Weekly

James Alan Gardner
ISBN 0-380-81332-7
$7.99 ($10.99 Can.)
Mass Market Paperback

Shaman's Crossing

Book One of The Soldier Son Trilogy



"Hobb is probably one of the best writers of the fantasy genre currently operating... Her characters are believable, human and flawed."
—Birmingham Post

Robin Hobb
ISBN 0-06-075762-0
$25.95 ($34.95 Can.)
Hardcover

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Quantum Bit Exists in Two States Simultaneously: On

By David Gerrold

SO THERE I WAS AGAIN — sitting in one of the back booths at Bob's Big Boy restaurant on Riverside Drive, walking distance from the Warner Brothers lot — having a private audience with Pope Daniel the First of The Church of the Chocolate Bunny; well, as private as you could have in the back of a crowded restaurant. Never mind.

Pope Daniel is a.k.a. "That Pesky Dan Goodman," whose acquaintanceship is one of those particular crosses a writer is required to bear. It's unavoidable. As you fumble your way through life, you keep stumbling into certain people who insist on becoming part of your *karass*, whether you want them in it or not. In an earlier life, he had dragged me into The Mode Inquiry, which had later become The Mode Training, which had eventually gotten me into a lot of trouble in my personal life. But that's

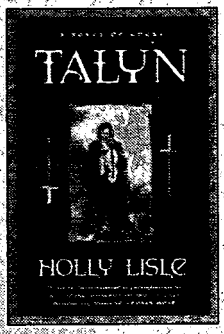
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Travel to fantastic worlds this summer

Holly Lisle

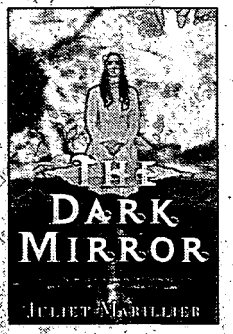
TALYN

0-765-30993-9
$26.95/$37.95 Can.



Now in hardcover

"Fierce loyalties, foul magics, and fresh plot twists abound in Holly Lisle's tale of love, war, and possession."
—Jacqueline Carey



Juliet Marillier

THE DARK MIRROR

0-765-30995-5
$27.95/$36.95 Can.

Now in hardcover

"An engrossing, beautifully written work of historical fiction."
—*Booklist* on *Wolfskin*

Andre Norton and Sasha Miller

DRAGON BLADE

0-765-30747-7
$24.95/$34.95 Can.

Now in hardcover

"Multiple plot lines provide nonstop action... the main characters are well developed and the plot is engaging."
—*VOYA* on *Knight or Knave*

Gene Wolfe

THE KNIGHT

0-765-34701-6
$7.99/$10.99 Can.

Now in paperback

★ "Wolfe doesn't just rearrange the clichés of sword and sorcery fiction; he recreates the genre... this is a compelling, breathtaking achievement." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

TOR

www.tor.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd learned to consider him as source material for all those stories I had no idea how to write.

Now, Pope Dan was candidly sharing that his karmic chicken had come home to roost — with a vengeance — and it was not laying chocolate Easter eggs. The church had come into being as the result of a doctrinal schism in the Church of the Bunny, also a legitimate faith, but now several of his members were flirting with their own doctrinal dispute.

The subject at hand was whether the bunny was hollow or solid, or if in fact it might be filled with chocolate truffle. There was also some discussion of whether one should start by biting off the bunny's ears or its tail, but this had not yet risen to the level where accusations of heresy were being made.

His Holiness had taken a tolerant view of the whole affair, saying only that the bunny is not dogmatic. If anything, the bunny is haremetic. Never mind. Pope Dan's only stated position on the matter was that the darker the chocolate, the greater the spiritual access, with Dove Bars, Godiva truffles, and certain Swiss imports ranking quite high on the list of sacred tithes.

However, he was concerned that some members of the faith had fallen into degenerate practices. While the bunny didn't specifically frown on dipping fresh strawberries or orange slices into a thick dark sauce, there were some people who had expanded that repertoire to include...well, rhubarb. His holiness had so far taken a cautious position on the matter — that the bunny really didn't want to be bothered with content, only with maintaining context; that is, chocolate in any and all of its forms, regardless of detail.

Nevertheless, in private, the Pope was willing to concede that he felt somewhat repulsed by the rhubarbarian faction of the faith. "Rhubarb," he said with rising passion, "is the devil's abomination. That's why it's red. Rhubarb should stay in the vegetable bin where it belongs, but no — it's always recruiting other fruits and berries to get into pie with it, for detestable acts of *misvegenation*. But — " he admitted, "if I were to voice that view, I would be opening a jar of Gummi worms. What should I do? Tolerate a position that I know in my heart of hearts betrays the pure chocolate soul of the bunny? Or should I demand adherence to the sacred tenets and risk triggering an unfortunate heretical schism in the faith?"

The waiter brought our food then, so I was spared the burden of having

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New from Aspect

WILL MANKIND SURVIVE?

From *New York Times* bestselling author
Kevin J. Anderson

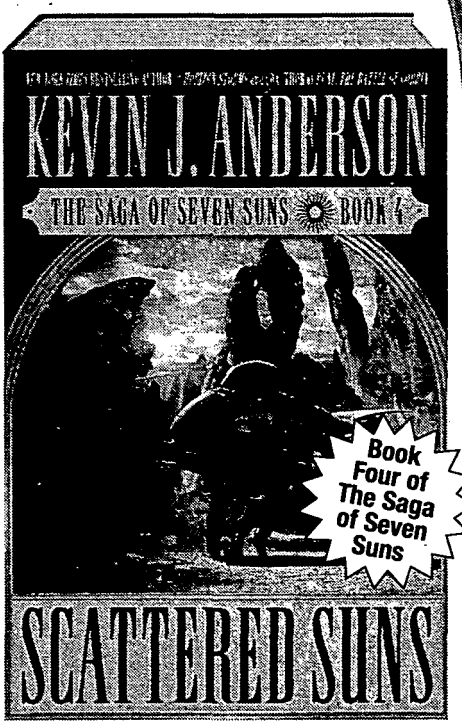
War is escalating, and civilizations across the Spiral Arm are cracking under the strain. Tensions mount and empires crumble. Could this be the end of the human race?

"CRACKLING WITH ENERGY AND BUZZING WITH ACTION."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) on *Horizon Storms*, Book Three

"A RIP-ROARING SPACE OPERA FULL OF TREACHERY, MYSTERY, ADVENTURE, INTRIGUE... AND JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE YOU CAN IMAGINE."
—*Science Fiction Chronicle* on *A Forest of Stars*, Book Two

"FULL OF BATTLES, CHASES, AND HAIRBREADTH ESCAPES... AN INTELLIGENTLY CONCEIVED AND EXECUTED NAIL-BITER."
—*Booklist* on *Hidden Empire*, Book One

AVAILABLE IN HARDCOVER



ASPECT
WHERE IMAGINATION KNOWS NO BOUNDS
Time Warner Book Group
Read an Excerpt Online at www.twbookmark.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to take a stand on a spiritual matter. And after the waiter left, Pope Dan had already moved on to the real heart of his dilemma. "It's the difference between context and content," he said. "Context is the larger vision. Content is the circumstances — all the strategy and mechanics. All the doing. If you hold the context, then the circumstances are supposed to follow automatically. As soon as you put your attention on the circumstances, you start losing context. And the context here is — " He considered for a moment. " — chocolate." He took a bite of his double-deck Big Boy hamburger, chewed thoughtfully, then announced. "Never mind. I just answered my own question." He didn't bother to give me the details though, and I wasn't sure I wanted to ask. With "That Pesky Dan Goodman," there are some discussions you really do not want to start. There is no off-button.

Abruptly, he looked across at me. "Anyway, that's not why I asked you to meet me here today."

Ordinarily, I would have begged off. I didn't always have the time or the energy for "That Pesky Dan Goodman," but it was my day for errands, it wasn't that far out of the way, and you don't have to ask me twice to have lunch at the last remaining Big Boy restaurant within convenient driving distance — and there was that other thing too. Whatever else he was, Pope Dan was never boring. So if he had something specific to ask, well, what the hell —

He put the last of his burger back down on the plate, took a sip of his Coke, cleared his throat, and said, "How would you like to be a saint in the Church of the Chocolate Bunny?"

"It's an honor, to be sure," I said noncommittally. "But don't you have to be dead to be a saint?"

"What fun is that? Why not get your acknowledgment while you're still around to hear it?"

"There is that," I admitted. "But I'm not sure I deserve the honor."

"Why not?"

Shrug. "I don't feel like a saint."

"Nobody does. So what?"

"I'm a curmudgeon. My bad days are tectonic. The EPA issues alerts about me. If you want courtesy, you need a subpoena. It takes a court order just to get me to return a phone call. Does that sound like a saint?"

"And your point is?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm not a saint."

"So what's your definition of a saint?"

Had to think about that one for a moment. "Um. Somebody who saves lives, somebody who serves as a good example, somebody who makes a difference in a good way...stuff like that."

"Stuff like that. Okay."

"I haven't thought about it all that much."

"That's obvious. Usually, you bring a lot more clarity to your speaking. So what's your definition of a saint?"

"I thought I just answered that."

"No. You threw some words at me."

"I said I don't know."

"Not true. You already know what a saint is. So tell me that." His eyes bored into me.

Sigh Now you know how he earned the nickname *Pesky*. I started flipping through my mental filing cabinet, looking for the file that said *saint*. I found it, but mostly it was illegible. I had a vague illiterate sense that more accurate words belonged in this space, but I didn't have them yet. Hmm. I sat in silence and sorted through concept-symbols, looking for the ones that would most accurately evoke the experience of saint-hood. Finally —

"Gandhi," I said. "Martin Luther King."

"Those are people, not definitions."

"That's my definition."

"Do you think Gandhi never had a bad day? Do you think Dr. King never lost his temper?"

"I never really thought about it. Maybe they did. But they obviously didn't give in to it."

"Yes, they always remembered the context. The vision."

"What's this all about? I mean, what's this *really* about?"

"Don't change the subject. I am going to declare you a saint."

"I'm not worthy."

"Yes, you are. Your reluctance to accept the honor is just the final bit of proof."

"And if I say, 'Yes, I accept. I really really deserve this honor,' the offer will be withdrawn, right?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wrong. How you feel about it is irrelevant. You're a saint."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

That stopped me. Why not indeed? I turned the thought over in my head. "Okay, so what if I really am worthy of the honor? Doesn't that count as the sin of pride?"

"Not really. Worthiness and pride are two different things. What do you win by walking around feeling unworthy?" He picked up the last of his burger. "Personally, I'd rather have gluttony. You get more chocolate."

"There is that about The Church of The Chocolate Bunny," I said. "It has its tangible benefits. All your rewards are here. No waiting for graduation to the next plane."

"That's why you're a saint today — and not after you die. Because I say so. I'm the Pope. I can make anybody a saint I choose."

And then I got it. I'm not stupid, but sometimes it takes me a few minutes to get to punch line. "This has nothing to do with sainthood, right?"

"No, it has everything to do with sainthood."

"Eh?" A word I learned from reading Heinlein.

"How come there's no spiritual science?" He downshifted into a much more serious manner. "We spend billions studying the farthest reaches of the universe. We spend billions on hardware and technology to fight disease. We spend hundreds of billions inventing ways to blow people up and even more billions inventing ways to accurately target the people we want to blow up. We spend billions studying everything from whether or not there's a gay gene on the X-chromosome to the fact that sales of strawberry Pop-Tarts go up seven-fold whenever a hurricane warning is issued."

"Really?"

"Really. So why don't we spend the same amount of money studying God? Maybe a few philosophers and theologians are nibbling around the edges, but for the most part, we've got a lot of people making claims about the nature of God without much evidence to back up their assertions."

I made a show of furtively glancing around the restaurant. "Careful, Your Holiness. People have been burned at the stake for less."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm already classified as an agent of Satan," he said, "for mocking the concept of religion. Hmpf. If I'm an agent of Satan, where's my ten percent?"

"Fifteen percent," I corrected. "Good agents cost more."

He waved it away. "But you're right. It's a dangerous question to ask. Why is there no spiritual science?"

"You want me to answer that, right? That's the purpose of this lunch — and the sainthood. Right?"

He put on his Cheshire cat expression. That was all the answer I was going to get.

"All right." I sighed. "I'll tell you why there's no spiritual science. Because there's no science in spirituality. Science is the study of facts — things that are measurable, testable, repeatable, verifiable. I won't bore you with the inevitable discussion of objective reality and how it's ultimately unknowable because we filter it through our individual subjective realities, I'll cut directly to the chase. Science is about the stuff we can agree on. Rocks are hard, water is wet. You don't have to believe in the big yellow bus that runs along Riverside Drive, but if you stand in front of it, it will go *ka-thump* whether you believe in it or not. You don't have those kinds of facts about God. What you have is a book. Several books. A whole bunch of books — " I stopped myself. Embarrassed.

"And — ?" His Holiness prompted.

"And I can tell you that books can't be trusted. I know that for a fact. I'm a writer. I've written more than forty books. Here's *everything* you need to know about books. The writer always stacks the deck. *Always.* Next question."

"I already knew that. I've read your books." Pope Dan was plussed — the opposite of nonplussed. He sailed on, right over the edge. "Okay, now argue it from the other side. What if there's a reason why God has to remain an unprovable fact?"

"And that reason would be?"

"Very simple. If you could prove the existence of God, you would destroy free will."

"Eh? 'Splain me."

"God isn't about proof. God is about faith. The minute you have hard evidence — factual evidence, like the kind you cited; measurable, testable, repeatable, verifiable — the minute you have that kind of evidence,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you don't need faith anymore. It's just like the big yellow bus. Whether you believe in it or not, it's going to go — your word — *ka-thump.*"

"So belief is what we use instead of knowledge?"

"I didn't say belief, I said faith. Two different things. What's that Solomon Short quote you shared with me — "

I riffled through the mental rolodex. "'Science is evidence without conviction. Faith is conviction without evidence.'"

"No, not that one. The other one. The one about the cat."

"Oh, right. It's a paraphrase of Twain, to make a slightly different point — it's about distinguishing the distinctions." I recited dutifully, "'If a cat sits down on a hot stove, that's experience. If it never sits down on a hot stove again, that's knowledge. But if it never sits down on a cold one either — that's belief.'"

"Right. Faith has nothing to do with belief. Yes, I know that some people have confused the two terms. That's convenient for them, but it's philosophically and semantically inaccurate. Faith is your conviction in the possibilities before you. That's all. Faith is your commitment to doing the right thing, no matter what, whatever it takes. Faith isn't about the circumstances, it's about the larger vision. Not content — context. Okay?"-He pointed, gestured with his whole hand. "Now, if God were to manifest in provable ways, you'd have no need for faith, would you? God would be the big yellow bus. So you wouldn't have to look to your own convictions for knowledge of what's right and wrong, you wouldn't have to be responsible for yourself, you'd just follow the rules — blindly. You wouldn't need a mind, you wouldn't need free will. Oh hell, you wouldn't even need a soul."

"Hey, you're forgetting — I work in television. I sold mine years ago."

"You only rented it out. You reclaimed it when you left *Star Trek* — but do you see my point? God is a practical joker. The only proof of God is that we cannot prove God."

"C. S. Lewis beat you to it. 'Do you see the invisible cat? Of course not, it's invisible. See? That proves it's there.'"

"Right. It's the only way to take care of the invisible mice. But that's the point. The only science of God that we can have has to lie in the realm of philosophy."

"So God is nothing more than a philosophical chew toy for intellectual terriers?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pope Dan shook his head. "That's the joke, son. Philosophy is not a spectator sport. We live our philosophies. Only most of us don't know it. Most of us are unconscious to our personal philosophies. We make up a bunch of stuff without thinking about it. Men are this, women are that, northerners are this, southerners are that, blacks are this, whites are that, and so on. And then we live in that philosophy and we produce results that prove we're right to think the way we do. And then we wonder why we only get just enough of what we want to make ourselves miserable." He stopped abruptly. He must have seen the look on my face.

"You keep that up," I said, "and people are likely to start taking you seriously. You might have to build that chocolate cathedral you're always talking about."

"It wouldn't last. Too many lesbians in the L.A. area. But thanks — I think."

"So what does all this have to do with saints? That was where we started, remember?"

"Exactly my point. What is the personal philosophy of someone whom you and I might consider a saint? And why do some people have it and not others? Where does it come from? Why hasn't science studied that? That's one thing we do have that we *can* study. Except for maybe a few transformational workshops here and there, is anyone really studying the technology of consciousness? And I don't mean brain studies or psychological experiments. I mean — " Pope Daniel the First stopped himself, regathered his thoughts, and came at the question from a different angle. "You're a science fiction writer — science fiction is always about the essential question, 'What does it mean to be a human being?' So here's the question I want answered. What makes a person a saint? Is it some evolutionary step, the next level of human *being*? Or is it some power of mind and soul that all of us are capable of? This is why you're a saint in my church. Of all the people I know, you're one of the few who would actually take the time to consider the question seriously, and from outside the box. That's the important part. So that's why this lunch." He reached across the table and scooped up the check. "This is on me."

"Well, seeing as how I've just been in the presence of a miracle — " I indicated the check in his hand, "I don't see how I can refuse. But — "

"But what?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm not sure where to start. I'm not even sure we've answered the question. What's a saint?"

"Look around," he said. "You'll see examples all around you. Oh — " he interrupted himself, standing. "Can you give me a ride over to the LASFS[1] clubhouse? I'll hang around the library for a few hours, then catch a ride home after the meeting."

"It's a little out of my way, but — sure. I can do it. But I need to stop for gas first." The conversation wandered off-topic then, from the price of gas, to cars in general, to my son's love of cars and his progress toward certification as an auto mechanic, to families in general, and by then, we had pulled into the Mobil station.

While I pumped the contents of my wallet into the gas tank of my car, I considered the question. I looked around the gas station, people-watching, examining the other drivers for evidence of sainthood. Do saints pump their own gas? Apparently not. These people seemed resigned, frazzled, annoyed — anything but excited and interested. They did not look like they were having fun.

My attention was caught by a vagrant, not too scruffy, but clearly a person in need; scraggly gray hair, ill-fitting clothes, probably scrounged from a Goodwill rack, dirty white socks and ragged tennis shoes. He had a limp and a stammer and an incongruous smile. Mentally impaired? Couldn't tell. I studied him with the dispassionate ease of a full belly.

A serious-looking young man in a windbreaker got out of a late model something. He reeked of education and success. As he fumbled his wallet out, the homeless man came hobbling across to him, a squeegee in his hand. "Sir, sir — let me wash your windshield, p-please. For a dollar, sir. It's such a nice-looking car, you should take care of it. I'm not b-begging, I just want to earn a few b-bucks for something to eat over at the Burger King."

The young man didn't even look over. He turned away deliberately. On the back of his windbreaker, it said, "The happiest place on Earth."

"P-please don't turn away from m-me, sir. I'm a human b-being, just like you. Just because I'm homeless, that doesn't m-mean you have the

[1] The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, the oldest science fiction club in the world. The members of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society may dispute this, but they're wrong. Really.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

right to treat me rude." The young man kept his back turned, kept his focus on the gas pump and the credit card he was sliding into it. "You work at the happiest place on Earth. You make people happy. That's a gift. Let me give you a gift. Let me make you happy. I'll even wash your windshield for free — "

Perhaps the young man had borrowed the jacket. Obviously, he worked somewhere else. Either that or I was now seeing why the so-called happiest place on Earth had earned the nickname Mouschwitz. Or Duckau. The back of the windbreaker was no longer a promise; now it was an implacable corporate wall. The happiest place only if you had enough money to buy your way in.

Before he turned away, the vagrant brightened, "May the good lord bless you, sir, and keep you safe from harm." Then, as a late model white Camry slid into place, he hobbled toward it. An angry woman was already peeling herself out of the car. She had frizzy hair, dyed orange, and an expression like an act of violence. Before the man could even begin to speak, she started cursing at him. "Get away from me, you fucking bum."

"You've had a bad day, ma'am. Let me do something kind for you. You don't have to give me anything, I'll wash your windows just for a smile."

"Don't you touch my fucking car!" she screamed at him. He backed away, visibly frightened. But then, his smile returned almost immediately. "It's all right, ma'am. May the good lord bless you and keep you safe." He turned away, his eyes scanning rapidly. The station was busy and he went immediately to three college students wearing expensive shoes and post-adolescent sneers. "That's a nice car, you should take good care of it — " He was already reaching for the squeegee.

"Sorry, man — I can't spare anything. I need it all for gas."

The vagrant turned and looked up at the evidence on the station's sign. "Holy crap," he said. "Yes, you do. You need your dollar more than me. I'll clean your window for free."

"No, man — that's all right. Here — " One of the students peeled off a dollar and handed it to the homeless man.

"Bless you, bless you, young man. May the good lord smile on you tonight." He waved and limped on to the next car. The driver pulled away before he got there.

I replaced the nozzle back on the pump, screwed the gas cap back on,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then walked around to the passenger side window. I leaned down and spoke softly to His Holiness. "Look over there," I said. "There's your saint."

Pope Dan had seen the same incidents I had; he nodded, then looked back to me. "Why him?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because even in the face of total rejection, ugliness, and hostility, he never lost his faith in other human beings."

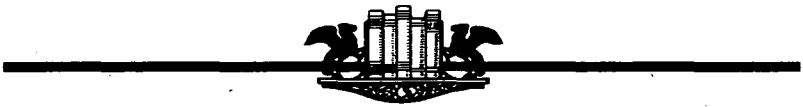
"And what does that say about you — being able to recognize that?"

"Dunno," I said. I was already pulling a twenty out of my wallet, hoping to buy a small piece of another man's dignity. "Hey!" I called. "Over here. No, you don't need to do the windshield. I'm paying you for the lesson."

As I pressed the bill into his hand, he met my gaze directly. He saw the question in my eyes and nodded knowingly. Instead of blessing me, he leaned forward and whispered, "You want to know the secret, don't you? It's no secret, it's just this — you can't ask people to be generous unless you first show 'em what it looks like. That's all."

He stuffed the twenty into the pocket of his jeans without even looking at it. Then he grinned and saluted, turned, and hobbled off to meet the next driver.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Limits of Enchantment, by Graham Joyce, Atria Books, 2005, $23.

THERE ARE two things I really like when it comes to Graham Joyce's books: how varied his characters are and how thoroughly he gets under their skin.

This new novel, set in a small English village during the sixties, is the coming of age story of a young woman named Fern Cullen who has been raised by her foster mother Mammy Cullen, the local midwife and wisewoman. Fern is naive in the ways of the world beyond their cottage and the local woods, but wise in the alchemy of herbs, potions, and the mysteries of the land itself.

In her late teens, Fern is of an age when she should be calling her own helping spirit to her, but for her the act of doing so is complicated. For one thing, she's not quite sure she believes in the magic that Mammy accepts the way everyone else does breathing. For another (a great many others, as it turns out), the outside world has come intruding on their pastoral life:

One of the local men has taken a decided interest in Fern, hippies have moved into the estate house nearby, Mammy gets sick and is sent to the hospital, and the cottage is about to be taken away unless Fern can come up with a year's back rent. For Fern, heretofore always in the company of the old wisewoman, the unfamiliar loneliness, the worry over Mammy's illness, and the unexpected need for her to take charge of her own life all combine into a stew of confusion until Fern's not quite sure what to do next.

As I mentioned above, Joyce has a gift for characterization and he certainly inhabits this young country woman's skin. The story is told from her point of view and the cadence of the prose is welcoming and familiar. The book is mostly a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mainstream story, but one with magic playing around the edges until the day Fern sets out to call her helping spirit to her. And then...well, you need to read the book to see how it all works out.

There's an element of nostalgia, evoked in Fern's fascination with the hippies and their music, with the beginnings of the women's rights movement, and with a sputnik satellite, circling above the world, a piece of magical science in her world of natural magics. But that nostalgia is for older readers who can remember when these things were new, changing the world. In the book itself, these elements are current events and affairs, perhaps threatening; their nostalgia is for the older times and ways that Mammy represents, and for the village's customs and traditions.

It all makes for fine reading: earthy and magical, full of wisdom and insights into why people do the things they do.

Highly recommended.

Arts Unknown: The Life & Art of Lee Brown Coye, by Luis Ortiz, Nonstop Press, 2005, $39.95.

Fans of the old *Weird Tales* magazine, Arkham House books, and *Whispers* (both the magazine and the anthology series) will recognize the art in this book, if not necessarily the name of the artist. But Lee Brown Coye (1907-1981) was a well-respected artist and professor from New York state whose work encompassed a broader range than just his macabre illustrations. Though Coye certainly worked in color for book dustjackets, I remember him best for his pen-and-ink illustrations in the above-mentioned publications, many of which are reproduced here.

Coye's art is individual, to say the least — you're either going to like it or you won't — but it turns out that the man himself was as interesting as his work. He lived a hard but full life, ably chronicled here by Luis Ortiz, who explores it from the beginning, from his work in the advertising field to his involvement with Karl Edward Wagner's Carcosa Press and the dark fantasy field in the late seventies/early eighties.

While the text tells a fascinating story, it's the art Ortiz has collected for this edition that is the real treat. There are wonderful examples of his dark fantasy work herein, as one might expect, but also an extensive collection of his non-genre art, from book illustrations to cartoons and sculpture.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This one's recommended to aficionados of the old pulps, and strikingly odd artwork in general.

The God Particle, by Richard Cox, Del Rey, 2005, $13.95.

The God Particle is just a plain delight, from beginning to end. Chock full of the science of physics, and featuring a research scientist as one of the main leads, it's a fast-paced thriller with great characters and a plot that keeps you on the edge of your seat.

The bonus? You learn a little bit more about particle theory than perhaps you already knew (at least I certainly did).

The interesting thing? You'll be so busy enjoying the book that you won't even realize how much you're learning.

The novel runs on two separate plotlines. In one of them, we meet Mike McNair, a physicist working on a research project in Texas to find the "God particle," a key to revealing crucial insights into everything we don't know about time and space and matter. He's under a deadline because the project is privately funded and the investors are expecting results, becoming impatient enough to send in their own scientist to — McNair soon realizes — take over the project. And if his replacement should be successful, she'll also steal all the credit from McNair and his team.

At the same time, McNair — as awkward a man as you'll meet — begins a relationship with a TV anchor who's won over by an e-mail exchange in which the two discuss religion and physics (and which make for very readable and informative arguments upon which we get to eavesdrop).

The book, however, opens with an entirely different cast and their relationships.

It's here we meet Steve Keeley, an American businessman in Zurich who, on the evening of the day that he's bought an engagement ring for his girlfriend back in the States, discovers that she's cheating on him. (And how he discovers this is a warning to us all about the dangers of a cell phone's speed dial.) Understandably unhappy with this new knowledge, Keeley goes for a drink, ends up in a strip bar where, late in the night, he finds himself drunk and in the middle of an altercation with a man much bigger and certainly stronger than he.

Keeley winds up going out a third-floor window only to wake up in a Zurich hospital — suffering not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much more from his drop than some curious delusions that turn out to be the beginning of mild psychic abilities. One of these is the knowledge of a field that surrounds him, a field in which he can sense things that will happen before they do. Considering that this field is superimposed upon his view of the world as the rest of us see it, he soon feels as though he might be losing his mind. What he does lose, when he gets back to California, is his job and his ability to interact with the rest of the world.

After a chance viewing of a news broadcast on McNair and his research, Keeley realizes that the "Higgs field" McNair is studying bears a disconcerting resemblance to the field he senses around himself. So he goes to Texas, hoping that McNair can help him understand the impossible things he is experiencing.

So far so good. And the plot rumbles on merrily from there as all the separate characters begin to interact with each other to great good effect.

If the author stumbles a bit with the cause behind Keeley's affliction (the man responsible seems to chew the scenery more than act like a real character), he more than makes up for it with the wonderful depictions of the rest of the characters, to such an extent that we absorb their quiet moments as happily as we do the action scenes.

And throughout, the science remains at the fore — fascinating speculations on the cutting edge of physics. If you're as unfamiliar with Richard Cox's work as I was, I don't doubt you'll be as delighted as I am to find a new writer who makes hard sf such a delight to read.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Old Man's War, by John Scalzi, Tor, 2005, $23.95.

Market Forces, by Richard K. Morgan, Del Rey, 2005, $14.95.

Moonstruck, by Edward M. Lerner, Baen, 2005, $24.

Paradise Passed, by Jerry Oltion, Wheatland Press, 2004, $19.95.

Natural History, by Justina Robson, Bantam Spectra, 2005, $13.

Hammered, by Elizabeth Bear, Bantam Spectra, 2005, $6.99.

Spin State, by Chris Moriarty, Bantam Spectra, 2003, $6.99.

Accelerando, by Charles Stross, Ace, 2005, $24.95.

I know I'm going to get myself in trouble with this column, but a critic should expect nothing less for speaking his mind.

I've been reading a ton of sf lately — more than usual, even — and the suspicion has fallen on me that the most interesting, provocative, forward-looking, and just plain satisfying novels have been coming from our British cousins rather than home-grown American talent. This is not to say that U.S. writers have put out nothing impressive (Tony Daniel, Kage Baker, and Scott Westerfeld spring immediately to mind), but a short list of the novels that have hit me hardest over the past couple of years skews distinctly toward the Britons: M. John Harrison's *Light* and Geoff Ryman's *Air*; *Singularity Sky* and *Iron Sunrise* by Charles Stross; books by Alastair Reynolds, Richard K. Morgan, and Ken MacLeod....

Against those we have John Varley's new woolly mammoth time-travel caper, Ben Bova's unending astronomical encyclopedia in pulp clothing, the usual raft of space war sagas, and cyberpunk knockoffs. Even Joe Haldeman's latest, *Camouflage*, while expertly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

crafted and compelling, struck me as oddly empty inside.

I don't particularly enjoy playing us-against-them, and I certainly don't want to draw broad conclusions from a decidedly unscientific sampling. But I think my recent disenchantment with U.S. sf is more than a blip — I think it's due to some tangible trends at work over here, a genuine shift in what U.S. writers are writing (or what U.S. publishers are publishing), perhaps simply one of those occasional gaps in the up-and-coming talent stream. It's a suspicion at least worth putting to the test.

Heinlein's Ghost

The longer Robert Heinlein stays dead, the more influence he seems to exert on U.S. sf writers. Case in point: *Old Man's War*, a debut novel by blogger John Scalzi. *Old Man's War* doesn't ape the later, hyper-didactic Heinlein, nor even the Heinlein of *Stranger in a Strange Land* or *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. Like most Heinlein imitations, it invokes the spirit of 1950s Heinlein — the writer of those beloved juvenile novels, and most especially, *Starship Troopers*.

Scalzi does a solid job of conjuring that ghost with a tale of unrelenting interstellar, interspecies warfare. Elderly widower John Perry follows in the steps of thousands of Earth's senior citizens, joining the Colonial Defense Forces on a ten-year enlistment in exchange for a fresh new body, and after a brief interlude of frolic with his fellow recruits, Perry plunges into the ferocity and carnage of humanity's neverending battle for galactic living space. Scalzi's straightforward, muscular prose and tightly focused pacing yield an undeniable page-turner, but it amounts to little more than a fix for the Heinlein junkie. (Indeed, Scalzi has made it clear that he wasn't aiming any higher: "I wrote *Old Man's War* as military sf becase that's what I saw selling," he wrote recently on his blog.) He presents his grim Campbellian vision with little commentary, overt or implied. Perry experiences a token moment of doubt ("I'm a monster.... We're *all* fucking inhuman monsters, and we don't see a damned thing wrong with it."), but his comrades dismiss it breezily as a predictable phase. And we hear no more of that. If *Old Man's War* is today's answer to *The Forever War*, it suggests a creeping superficiality in U.S. science fiction — the triumph of nostalgia and pastiche over fresh invention.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By contrast, consider U.K. author Richard K. Morgan's most recent, *Market Forces*. It's not his best — it lacks the dense and evocative background of his Takeshi Kovacs books, and Morgan is not as sure-handed with near-future situations and characters — but it takes chances and largely succeeds. The new novel marries the *projectio ad absurdum* of *Rollerball* and *Death Race 2000* to a trenchant critique of predatory capital and free market social Darwinism to produce a future in which competition for executive positions takes the form of vehicular combat. "Come in with blood on your wheels, or don't come in at all." Investment samurai Chris Faulkner has risen from the cordoned city zones, where the poor wage their own brand of lethal competition, to become a star in the Emerging Markets sector, and now he's taking the next step, joining the Conflict Investment division of one of the most successful and ruthless companies in the world.

Conflict investment is exactly what it sounds like: Deploying capital for profit in the many small wars that simmer around the globe. "All over the world, men and women still find causes worth killing and dying for. And who are we to argue with them?" declaims the head of Chris's department. "At Shorn Conflict Investment, we are concerned with only two things. Will they win? And will it pay?" As the taped conversations of Enron traders have shown, such gleefully amoral rhetoric doesn't stretch the realities of today's corporate boardrooms very far. But with the freeway duels and other executive violence, Morgan renders the savagery at the heart of the globalized corporate system almost ludicrously literal, and this brand of satire requires a very delicate touch. At first, Morgan's steering is a little unsteady, but a few chapters in, he's hooked us and overcome any resistance to his outlandish premise. The violent action sequences keep the critique from becoming preachy, and Morgan has the necessary will to follow the brutal logic of his story to a suitably grim conclusion. *Market Forces* has all the narrative drive of *Old Man's War*, but it's also got some vital ideas revving its engine, a purpose beyond mere diversion.

Fear of a New Future

The nostalgic impulse in U.S. science fiction runs far deeper than the Heinlein imitation on display in *Old Man's War*. Indeed, while channeling the spirit of the Master,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Scalzi clothes his tale in today's fashions — from the weapons his soldiers use to the ships in which they travel, the process whereby they're shifted into new bodies, and the physics underlying faster-than-light travel, Scalzi draws on up-to-date concepts and language that lend his novel a twenty-first-century air. He recycles the themes and outlook of vintage Heinlein, but at least provides the old wine a new bottle.

Edward M. Lerner's second novel, *Moonstruck*, carries the retro urge much further. If it weren't for some nanotechnology coming into play toward the end, the text might well have been pulled straight from the pages of a second-tier 1950s digest. The alien F'thk land in Washington, D.C., bringing greetings and possible admittance to the Galactic Commonwealth. But all is not as it seems. As the F'thk make their way around the globe, carrying their message to every nation and handing out souvenir crystal orbs ("symbol of galactic unity") to heads of state and everyday citizens alike, only presidential science advisor Kyle Gustafson and junior diplomat Darlene Lyons seem to doubt the aliens' story. Suspicions grow when something starts killing spy satellites; and then another, much different looking alien crash-lands in a small escape pod, telling an entirely different story. But is this one the truth, or another piece of an elaborate alien deception?

Lerner's yarn (serialized in *Analog*) has some of the charm of the old-fashioned sf it resembles, but it also sports many of its flaws. The thresholds of plausibility and verisimilitude are very low. The aliens, while physically quite inhuman, think and behave much like us. Their ship lowers a simple ramp to the ground after it lands, like something out of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The political milieu of Washington is sketched in like a cheap painted backdrop. Lerner even treats us to a dish of smeerped rabbit: "Her nurse," recalls the defecting alien, "taught that when life gives you a *kwelth*, you make *kwelther* stew with it." If Lerner means to play any of this for camp or ironic postmodern value, he gives no sign of it. *Moonstruck* is just what it appears to be: A wholehearted leap backward, a repudiation of everything that has happened in sf (and the world) in the past forty years.

Lerner provides a clue to the deeper roots of this nostalgic retreat in the character of Gustafson. In the first scene he's reminiscing about the Apollo 11 Moon landing,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and determined to bring the space program back to that glorious height: "Someday, he told himself, he *would* make it happen." That dream seems to animate much of the backward-looking sf produced in the U.S. (see John Varley's *Red Thunder, et al.*), and functions almost as shorthand for the (somewhat imaginary) good old days of relentless optimism and boundless opportunity. Perhaps we don't see this sort of nostalgic sf from U.K. writers because the U.K. did not share the U.S. postwar experience. While the U.S. was building a global empire, the U.K. endured the final loss of its own. They didn't land on the moon. They had a foundation of different literary traditions, more Wells than Gernsback, and the sf "golden age" of the '40s and '50s weighs less heavily on the other side of the ocean.

U.S. writer Jerry Oltion's latest, *Paradise Passed*, isn't so relentlessly retro as *Moonstruck*, but it displays a similar resistance to grounding its story in the kind of sophisticated imaginative framework we've come to expect in the best sf. Oltion uses a plausible design for the generation ship by which his characters reach the Alpha Centauri system, but that's about his only gesture toward believability. The space colonists might have been lifted from a mall in Anywhere, USA, with names like Ryan and Holly and Bob and Kristy and wholesome personalities to match (one of the older ladies on the ship —no joke— bakes snickerdoodles[1]), and Oltion makes no attempt to project a future path that could have led to the launching of this ship. Aside from a brief mention of the lone visionary who led the effort to construct the orbital colony from which the ship set off, we've got no clue how things went from today's dying space program to an interstellar colonization effort. That wouldn't be such a problem if the characters, culture, and technology aboard the ship were stranger, more convincingly futuristic, but as it stands it's impossible to imagine how these people would ever be chosen for such a difficult, delicate, and very possibly suicidal mission, or why the world they came from would choose to mount it.

This isn't to say that *Paradise Passed* offers nothing of interest. Oltion skimps on the surrounding details, but if you can get past that, you find a refreshingly gentle-minded

[1] Not that I have anything against snickerdoodles, but they're about the last thing I'd expect to evoke a future of interstellar colonization.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

consideration of the morality of colonization, the religious impulse, and the pitfalls of human nature. The stress and uncertainty of the voyage lead some of the crew into a religious revival that is only strengthened when they arrive at an almost incredibly Earthlike planet. But it's already home to a species with incipient human-like intelligence — about where our hominid ancestors were before the domestication of fire — and some of the colonists feel strongly that, no matter how attractive the planet, they should not interfere with the natural evolution of these aliens by settling there. Oltion's attention to the moral dimensions of human expansion into space comes as a welcome relief. It's nice to see that not all the nostalgically tinged U.S. sf gravitates inevitably toward the tooth-and-claw school.

The contrast with *Natural History*, the third novel from the U.K.'s Justina Robson, could hardly be sharper. Robson's future teems with strangeness, most notably in the shape of the "Forged," creatures designed and grown as composites of human, animal, and machine parts, engineered specifically for environments and tasks that "unevolved" humans could not endure or accomplish — the huge Gaiaforms, built to terraform other planetary bodies; the Ironhorses, freighters plying the space between worlds; others to work the deep seas or the asteroids; and the Voyagers, made for the slow and lonely journey to other star systems in search of alien life or Earthlike planets. Created essentially as servants of the unevolved, the Forged have grown weary of subservience to the "Monkeys," and an uneasy coexistence reigns, with many Forged campaigning for full independence.

Thus when Voyager Isol discovers not only a new planetary system but also a piece of alien technology that will become whatever its possessor wishes — for her, a faster-than-light drive so she can return immediately home — she sees it as the best chance for the Forged, a place to go and the means to get there. But the unevolved insist on sending one of their own to check on Isol's claims, so cultural archaeologist Zephyr Duquesne ventures with Isol to the new system, while other rebellious Forged experiment with the alien substance and plot escape no matter what verdict Zephyr brings back. The alien tech, however, seems to be exerting some strange influences on those who use it, and it may have a hidden cost that the Forged have not foreseen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robson's future is the kind you can sink into like a bath, full of allusions and details that suggest a vast, coherent history and culture of which only pieces come clear for the reader. And that future, for all its conflicts, has a captivating beauty to it, the kind of beauty we find in our own imperfect world. It feels a bit churlish, therefore, to complain about "mere" beauty, but if *Natural History* and other such far-future sf (by Britons or Americans) has a significant flaw, it's that venturing so far from today becomes another means of avoiding the difficulties of projecting credible, equally detailed futures from our immediate circumstances. Far-future sf serves as a platform for grand inventive spectacle, and the best of it produces a fully gratifying artistic experience, but it still leaves me yearning for what's untold, a connection to the present, the course of history that got us from here to there.

The Burden of Influence

Hammered, the first novel by U.S. writer Elizabeth Bear, escapes neither to the past nor the far future, but constructs its world of the 2060s from the raw material of the present. Former special forces soldier Jenny Casey carries the mental and physical scars of battle, including a prosthetic left arm and a deep resentment toward the government she once served. She hides from her past in one of the bleaker neighborhoods of Hartford, Connecticut, consorting with big- and small-time gangsters but largely keeping to herself. Her government hasn't forgotten her, though, and they have discovered something very interesting on Mars — an alien spaceship with an intact stardrive. With her unique neural modifications, Casey may be the only person who they can use to fly the thing, and they're not going to take no for an answer.

Bear's twenty-first century has some intriguing features drawn from ongoing events: The world, and human efforts in space, are no longer dominated by the United States, which has folded in on itself under a Christian Fundamentalist regime (it's a little frightening how plausible such a development has come to seem). China and (surprisingly) Canada compete most actively on the high frontier, and intervene aggressively in the world's trouble spots. Climate change has brought destruction to various parts of the globe. But in most respects her future looks like something

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we've seen many times before: desperate and violent urban centers, artificial intelligences emerging in the net, virtual reconstructions of famous personalities, neural augmentation, nanotech surgical bots. Bear devotes admirable attention to the physical and mental challenges that radical augmentation would likely entail, and *Hammered* certainly establishes Bear as a writer with intriguing potential, but she'll need to develop a more distinctive vision if she's going to claim a spot in the upper ranks.

In *Spin State* (originally published in trade paperback in 2003, and a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award), debut U.S. author Chris Moriarty draws on many of the same near-clichés, but she makes better use of them with a richer atmosphere and a more complex social and political framework. Catherine Li was once the adopted daughter of a poor miner on Compson's World, the source of the mysterious Bose-Einstein condensate that makes faster-than-light communications and travel possible among the United Nations-controlled worlds. She escaped the grim prospect of miner life by joining the U.N. Peacekeeping forces, but the suspicious death of near-legendary physicist Hannah Sharifi in the mines gets Li sent back to her homeworld, where she's expected to discover what happened to Sharifi while navigating the quagmire of tensions between the miners, the U.N. administrators, and the genetically engineered agents of the Syndicates, chief rivals of the U.N.

Like Bear, Moriarty focuses attention on the costs and consequences of advanced technologies on the human body, mind, and society. FTL travel erodes long-term memory, U.N. regulations limit the rights of citizens with too much genetic modification (Li has to conceal her own origins as a construct in order to keep her U.N. job), and the process of interfacing directly with a powerful AI nearly kills Li before they figure out how to modulate the neural overload. The traditional human vices of greed and powerlust continue to drive the engine of politics, and the U.N. will do anything to maintain its exclusive hold on the Bose-Einstein condensate mines. *Spin State* presents a gritty and convincing future with credible roots in the soil of our present. But Moriarty packs too much into the story. The plot and the future world sometimes grow murky behind so many different threads — Li's secret past, Sharifi's mysterious research, the motives

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Li's U.N. commander, Li's relationship with the AI known as Cohen, her scattered memories, the truth behind her father's death, a miners' strike, the secret nature of the Bose-Einstein condensates themselves. Somehow it's all a bit too much, so many balls in the air that the juggler's skill itself becomes obscured. Nevertheless, *Spin State* is the most impressive U.S. debut I've seen in several years, ambitious and full of inventive energy.

For the whole package, though, the full sf monty, you need to look to the U.K.'s Charles Stross and his latest novel, *Accelerando*. It's a kind of fix-up — all nine chapters appeared as stories in *Asimov's* between 2001 and 2004 — but it's Stross's best work to date. His previous sf novels, *Singularity Sky* and *Iron Sunrise*, were smart, well-crafted space operettas, plenty satisfying in their own right, but the scope and imaginative density of *Accelerando* raise the ante by an order of magnitude.

Accelerando traces the future history of the solar system through the story of twenty-first-century anarchist techno-guru Manfred Macx and his descendants, who participate in and eventually flee from the development of a runaway machine culture that undertakes to dismantle the orbital mass of the solar system — planets and all — in order to convert it to "computronium," a substance molecularly engineered for maximum computational efficiency. Stross doesn't tell this story from the kind of god's-eye, Stapledonian perspective sf frequently reserves for such grandiose developments. Instead we see it all through the eyes of the humans who remain by choice outside the increasingly alien computational civilization, and it's the future-warped worldviews of these characters — heavily influenced by the concepts behind network communications, computational theory, and reductive biology — that gives *Accelerando* its cortex-jangling sizzle.

Like Bruce Sterling or William Gibson at their best, Stross surfs a wave of ideas and information that seems always on the brink of collapsing into incomprehensibility, but never does — a careening plunge through strangeness in which every page contains something to mess with your head, and even familiar situations come firmly twisted. Here's Macx facing seduction by his estranged fiancée, Pam, who wants a child: "She's got the private keys to his hypothalamus...Three

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

billion years of reproductive determinism have given her twenty-first century ideology teeth: If she's finally decided to conscript his gametes into the war against impending population crash, he'll find it hard to fight back."

Accelerando reads like this throughout, like a high-bandwidth download through a pre-Pentium processor, yielding a constant sf high. Even the smallest details can provide a jolt of cognitive dissonance, as in Macx's reaction to a wall of printed books: "Manfred looks at the ancient, low-density medium and sneezes, momentarily bemused by the sight of data density measured in kilograms per megabyte rather than vice versa." This is the sort of viewpoint that makes everything seem strange, and thus *Accelerando* achieves an impressive level of bewildering futurity even in the sections that take place only a decade or two beyond the present.

Sf, even more than other literary workspaces, cannot afford to get mired in nostalgia and ancestor worship. The sf of earlier periods should be treasured, read and reread for the pleasures and spirit only it provides. But we cannot recreate it, and we should not try, no matter how disappointing the developments of the past few decades might seem. It's time to let Heinlein rest, and discover our own future. So far it appears that U.K. writers come better prepared to create twenty-first-century sf. But there's no reason U.S. writers cannot do as much, if only they'll turn their gazes from the past and look to today — and tomorrow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rich Mueller's recent stories include "Dutch" (Feb. 2005) and "Jew if by Sea" (May 2004). At the moment, he's developing a feature film and an animated series, but he took time out from his Hollywood work to offer us this alternate history tale—one which, he feels, makes more sense than his computer's operations manual. (Side note: fans of computer operating manuals should seek out Ray Vukcevich's novel The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces.*)*

Around our offices, we noticed that black smoke came out of one of our computers after this story was typeset. After six days, the smoke turned white.

Age of Miracles

By Richard Mueller

ARCHIBETTO SAT ON THE piled cargo bales and fingered his curved blade as the barge *Peregrinator* crept slowly toward Ferrara. It was a few minutes before sunrise, the very time of day when bandits would be most likely to attack, and Archibetto was certain that the *Peregrinator*'s four crossbowmen — who had been tippling mightily last night — would be in no condition to repel boarders. An owl cried out in the dawn gloom, and Archibetto pivoted slowly, turning in each direction. The valley farms and woods were gray and indistinct in the morning light, patterns and shapes only. Water sloshed against the hull of the barge, and the steady clop of the towhorses brought sound to the scene, but beyond the canal nothing was stirring.

Archibetto felt certain that this commission would set him up, possibly for years to come. He was confident that he could provide any service that the Magister might require and Archibetto had brought along thousands of ducats' worth of equipment to ensure success, *elementum et liber mollis*. He would outfit the Magister with the newest forms of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fenestrum, which were far superior to the *Malum Opera* products he'd been using. It was a stellar coup. His competitor Zucca would be furious.

The sun, rising fast now, backlit the ridgelines above the Po Valley, and Archibetto sensed rather than saw the horsemen. There were a dozen or more, banners carried at their head. Definitely not common marauders. Perhaps they were a local lord's guard. Archibetto felt a warning chill. Some of these local lords were no better than bandit chieftains. He watched as the horsemen turned to converge, heading for an arching bridge over the canal on which the *Peregrinator* traveled. The bargeman looked apprehensively at Archibetto.

"Who are they?" Archibetto asked. "Some local princeling's guard?"

"No, *Eruditus*. They carry the keys."

Stercus. An emissary of Pope Alexander, free to move without let or hindrance in pursuit of the Papal will. And, please God, thought Archibetto, may that will be somewhere else. But the lead horseman pulled up at the bridge and dismounted. A moment later came the clear call of the bridgeman's horn. *Stercus infelix!*

The bargeman looked back apologetically. "I'm sorry, *Eruditus*. They mean to board us. Better put that fish-gutter away."

Archibetto's heart sank, but he sheathed his knife as the bargeman began to bang his foot on the deck. After a moment, sleepy guards and passengers trickled up out of the companionway, pulling themselves together as the bargeman guided his vessel toward the dock.

The ceremonial horsemen remained mounted while a fat man in rich white robes made his way down to the dock, trailed by his two Assistants. Archibetto knew of these "Assistants," seeming humble clerks trained also as assassins and spies, *percontatore*, ultimately answerable only to the Black Chamber — or so the stories said.

Archibetto stamped on the planking to drive away the cold, for the stories also held that Inquisitor General Torquemada was dying. He could not see that this would make things better, which was why he was called "Gloomy Gus," the eternal pessimist. But Augusto Archibetto was not a negative man. He was reactive; a happy man in good times, a grumbler in bad. No wonder he had never married.

The bargeman brought his charge expertly up against the rope fenders. The crossbowmen were trying to look military, but under the gaze of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Papal Legate they wilted into pathetic time-servers, worth neither respect nor notice. As the gangway went over to the dock, the shining white Legate stumped up the plank with his staff of office banging a counterpoint. He marched right up to Archibetto.

"*Eruditus* Augusto Benedetto Archibetto?"

Archibetto nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The Legate's head looked like a great ball of yellow cheese with a face. Archibetto's stomach rumbled. He suspected that he was not going to get breakfast.

"You are summoned to appear in a judgment before the Vatican Council of Temporal Miracles," the Legate intoned severely. "We leave at once."

"But, but," Archibetto stammered, "my cargo. It is precious and destined for the Magister Michelangelo."

The Legate smiled placidly. "Your cargo will be coming with us. It too will be judged. And as for the Magister, I am sure that we shall come round to him presently."

The consignment, carefully padded and packed in a great road wagon, was on its way to Rome, to the papal palace and the stern-faced judges who would determine the fate of his enterprise and, in all probability, his life. Archibetto sat on the load, eating the cheese and oranges provided by one of Legate Graziani's Assistants. There was wine and bread to last the trip to Rome, that white-gray smudge in the distance.

The countryside along the road was simple in its beauty; people going about their daily lives, secure in the blessings of the Church and as yet untouched by the secular magicks of *dynamos* and *Computos*. Such things were the province of Archibetto and those like him, the new men, the bringers of progress. Provided the Inquisition approved.

It was not that Archibetto himself had done anything to arouse the attention of the Wandering Eye of Blame, but it was the new technologies that were pouring out of the workshops of da Vinci and Regimundi and Remigio, which were taking all of the Italian lands by storm. So far, the See had reserved comment; but now the winds were changing. Archibetto tried not to follow this line of thought too far, but it seemed likely that he was going to get soaked. The repercussions from missing his installment agreement with the Magister would be bad, but not so bad as if he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

disobeyed the Inquisition — everyone knew their power, their intolerance, and their zeal in ferreting out the enemies of the Church.

The discovery of the Principle of Dynamic Storage fifty years earlier by Giotto Panzi had led to the great collector banks growing up around each city and palace, *dynamos* pouring from the interaction of acid and metals and being restored by the turning of wire wheels and magnets. Soon would come *dynamos* produced through falling water and perhaps even the tides.

When the banks became portable, the batteries appeared which led to the self-propelled barge and the first experiments with electrical vehicles. (Andreas Locomeli was planning a car that would carry people and cargo on metal rails from Rome to Ostia.) Then, twelve years ago had come the *Computos.*

"*Eruditas,*" the wagon driver called, "we are almost there. Time to change into your best."

HIS FINEST ROBES were hot and sweatlogged on the inside and covered in dust without when at last Archibetto and his escort entered the Holy Precincts. The Legate was met in the outer courtyard by a retinue of Ammanuensi, Servitors, and Ordinaries, while the two Assistants guided Archibetto off to a small and forbidding archway.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Silence, prisoner. You'll learn in time."

"Why am I a prisoner?"

"You'll learn that as well."

He was locked into a small room with one barred window through which he could see and hear the loud and bustling city of Rome. The city might as well have been in Persia or far Cathay, for the chamber, though comfortable, was unmistakably a cell. There was simple food, candles, a hard bed, and he was allowed two daily trips to the garderobe. Otherwise, they left him alone for three days to ponder and worry. And being Archibetto, he worried with great enthusiasm.

Then a strange thing happened. By the end of the third day he had begun to manifest a deep calm, an optimism — almost an enthusiasm — for what might lay ahead. Having nothing to occupy his fevered brain, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

being unwilling to descend into self-abuse within the sacred precincts, he had spent an increasing amount of time thinking about the only woman he had ever loved. And lost. Twice. Once to another man and once, finally, to death.

Her name was Maria Avonnonia; she had run a large transport company in Modena, in charge of scores of wagons and hundreds of tough little mules. He called her the Mule Woman, and she called him the Word Man, for in those days he had been both a scribe and a poet. They were similar — yet different — and for a time they had been lovers, but she left him for another. For a time after that they had maintained a friendship, an association that both his friends and her new lover had found to be unnatural. He ignored his friends, and Maria kept her lover in line the way she ran her mules, firmly but with kindness. Then one of the fevers that were endemic to the river valleys of the Po Basin had carried off his Mule Woman, her lover, and most of his friends, and when Portas offered him a position in the new field of *Computos*, he accepted. It was a path out of the fever-stripped town, to a release from sorrow and toward wealth and travel. And, now it seemed, to a cell in the Vatican.

But Maria had always admonished him to look on the positive side of life, to find something in which to believe, to share in the happiness of the moment. With nothing else to occupy his time, Archibetto meditated on Maria and her simple wisdoms and the fact that she had taught him a good lesson. "I do not know how I shall react if put to the question," he decided, "but at this time I am whole, and that's a blessing." He closed his eyes, saw her sweet, impish face in his mind, and waited.

On the morning of the fourth day an Inquisitor came for him. This was no Assistant in sheep's clothing, but a fully caparisoned member of the Secular Arm of Faith. With polite words, he invited Archibetto to accompany him to the Council Chambers and, with equal politeness, Archibetto accepted. Putting his mind to such peace as he could gather, he donned his most somber robes and went to his judgment.

It was no surprise to him to see Portas waiting within the Chambers and his entire consignment laid out on tables in the Great Hall, a magnificent space of arching columns and a vaulted ceiling. High above, windows let in light, illuminating a series of frescos chilling in their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

depictions of heavenly justice and the rewards meted out to the fallen. Under the watchful eye of the Guards and Inquisitors, Portas was concatenating the components. He waved Archibetto over. "Help me make this system operable, my friend," he said, his eyes bulging, sweat ringing his pudgy neck. "Work as if your life depended on it, for I think that it does."

As they worked they talked in whispers. Plainy, Portas was frightfully nervous. "I understand that Operarius and his *Computos* are here as well, being examined in another chamber," he said.

"Surely, *Praefectus*, this is more than a simple product comparison."

"Yes," Portas hissed. "I think they are deciding on the very spiritual implications of *dynamos*."

There had been rumors afoot for years that the Vatican did/did not possess *dynamos* and dynamic devices, and that complex and endless discussions as to the nature of these inventions and technologies had been unresolved, either by discovery or Papal Decree. There had been no statements, no papers, no pronouncements. Many assumed that the Inquisition would find fault with these inventions, but they had been silent, spending their energy instead in pursuing heretics, Jews, pagans, and unbelievers. "Perhaps we are here to determine this the hard way," Archibetto wondered, "at the cost of lives and knowledge, and that God will give some answer." He closed his eyes for a second and tried to summon up the face of God, but what he got was Maria the Mule Woman, her smiling face seeming to say, "Figure it out for yourself."

As they finished the final, fiber-wrapped metallic connections, an Inquisitor approached, dragging a cable. With a mocking smile he handed it to Portas and then glided away. "Mmmph," grunted Portas. "They've got dynamic energy from somewhere. Is the grand conduit closed?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then." Portas connected the cable to the Inflow so that the *Computos* could accept the *dynamos*. "Well, at least nothing blew up," he said.

"Shall I engage the *dynamos*?"

"No, not until the Judges give us leave," Portas said softly, mopping his brow. "May the Blessed Virgin see fit to give us a smooth passage — "

"And not bedevil the system," Archibetto added.

"Amen to that, Gusto. Amen to that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

And so they waited; for the Judges to arrive, for trumpets and drums, for cosmic justice, wisdom, wrath, or mercy.

"I hope that the Magister is not too put out," Archibetto muttered, adjusting the position of the great cables for the tenth time. "He was expecting this today. He has a new design project and needed more stations for his Journeymen."

"What are we supposed to do?" Portas said crossly. "Say no to *Il Papa*? Michael will grumble, but I'll give him an advance copy of *Fenestrum VI* and he'll be delighted."

"It's ready?"

"Diabolic imps still inhabit several of the subsystems. Douai is de-imping them."

"Douai is good," Archibetto replied. "If anyone can do it, he can."

They prattled on softly in that vein for some time until they noticed that the Guards and Inquisitors who had been observing them had withdrawn. The two men had the Great Hall to themselves. What would come next? Arrows? Lions? Assassins?

"Careful," Portas hissed and jerked his head in the direction of the dim end of the huge room. A small man in white was tapping toward them with a cane. At first Archibetto thought that the person was blind but soon realized that the man was using the cane to steady a bad leg.

Archibetto and Portas watched expectantly. The little man smiled and looked back at them. It was an awkward moment, made even more so when he extended a frail hand, palm down. Neither had recognized the reclusive Pope Alexander VI but they certainly knew his ring. They fell to their knees, kissing it each in turn and muttering *apologias*.

"Up, up," he murmured. "No problems, please rise." He unself-consciously wiped their adoration off on his robes. "I have had more famous saliva on this hand — ugh, a grim custom. I can tell you this because, as tradesmen, no one would believe you. Do you know that they wanted to examine you *en camera*, a full ecclesiastical trial? They would argue about it endlessly until the tolerant ones would grow tired and only the Inquisitors would be left, and you know how that would come out. *Auto de Fe*."

Portas and Archibetto stared openmouthed at the raw confidences

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pouring forth from the mouth of the Vicar of God until *Il Papa* stopped, glanced at the *Computos* and said, "So, tell me about this miracle."

Portas closed his mouth, drew a deep breath, and began. "Fifty years ago, after Giotto Panzi succeeded in isolating and capturing the energy dynamic, many of the finest scholars in Italy...."

Alexander raised a hand and Portas froze. "My friend, I know the history. I have read the instructive treatises. I am conversant with all of the latest opinions, both temporal and spiritual. And, because I am sure you are wondering, yes, the Holy City is wired both for *dynamos* and *Telephonos*."

This came as a great shock to Archibetto who had, of course, heard rumors of the talking-machine-wire but had not believed them. The Pope went on. "Pontebello himself resides here, perfecting and developing his *Telephonos*, which is simple alongside this *Computos*. And I confess that your *Computos* and those of Operarius have many in the Church deeply concerned; the unknown nature of your systems and their development, the persistent use by your people of angelic and demonic metaphors to describe what you do, and the ability to calculate and analyze information in ways not accessible to the Holy See — all of these aspects are troubling. They may even be heretical or Satanic."

"Your Holiness," Portas said with quiet insistence. "Our systems and research, while always open to any visitor from the Holy See, must be kept from our competitors and the general public. We need that advantage if we are to develop new systems and improvements. We reference imps and angels strictly in metaphor. It is easier to say imp, for instance, than 'unknown fault attributable to uncertain system parameters.'"

Alexander nodded. "Go on."

"Yes. And as to any implications of a philosophical or theological nature, we make no claims. We are merely building machines and have been given the ability to do this by the Grace of God so that we may make our technical advancements to the Glory of God."

It was plain to Archibetto that Portas had been practicing this speech for some time. His Holiness listened, nodded, pursed his lips. After a moment he smiled. "Well said, Signor Portas — and quite what I expected you to say."

A moment of panic crossed Portas's face, but the Pope's smile deepened.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"After all, I am the Vicar of God and considered by some to be intelligent. You must permit me to anticipate all arguments; yours, the Inquisition's — but the final decision will, of course, be mine."

And then the Pope turned to Archibetto. "And you are the one who convinces the others to buy this marvel? The *Suadeo*?"

Archibetto bowed humbly. "Holiness, while I do not conceptualize or design the *Computos*, my position requires me to be as knowledgeable in their operation as possible."

Alexander smiled. "Well then, young man. Sell me your *Computos Fenestrum*."

With a glance at Portas, Archibetto turned the *clavis* that opened the grand conduit, and *dynamos* flowed into the circuit. Happily, the machine, after being dragged over half the roads in Italy, showed no hesitation. Archibetto showed *Il Papa* the keyboard with its ivory keys balanced on their silver *tympani*, how to change case and font, number and symbol. The Pope picked out his name and then looked with delight as it appeared on the *speculum dynamic*.

"At present we have only succeeded in turning Volframio's tungsten filament to light and darkness, but I am assured that, within a few months, we shall have colors."

"No! How many?"

Archibetto paused. This was leading into dangerous ground. The Church only recognized the seven colors of God's blessed rainbow. "Why...as many colors as God has given us, Holiness."

"Amazing. God has been generous with his inspiration."

Archibetto nodded, suffused with a mixture of both pride and humility. He demonstrated how files were kept, added to, and protected, how to use the storage disks of pressed fiber and mica, and how mathematical calculations were accomplished. "And this can be used to make documents?"

"Simple ones at present, but we are learning more and more every day. We managed to find a promising young apprentice of Leonardo's and are training him in the elements of graphic design. Or rather, he is now training us."

"You mean, on the *Computos*?"

"*Si*, Holiness. Allow me to show you our latest graphic program."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Servitors brought food and wine and Portas dined sparingly as he watched Archibetto's bravura performance. As the huge, clacking autoscriptor came to life, he walked over to join the Pope and his *Eruditas*. The great machine was grinding out a letter, a missive of greeting from the Holy See to the Sultan of the Ottomans in a demonstration that he and Archibetto had prepared long in advance. Alexander picked it up and perused it critically.

"We are improving the quality of all our systems on a daily basis," Portas said.

"And color soon?" Alexander's eyes twinkled in anticipation.

"Within three months, Holiness. It should be available to the public within a year."

"Why so long a delay?"

"Our experts need to de-imp the systems," Archibetto said, then stopped, reacting to the Pope's frown.

"Perhaps it would be better to use a less inflamatory term, one with no religious overtones. Perhaps a metaphor of insects. You might say, 'de-flea.'"

"An inspired idea, Your Holiness."

"Do think on it." Alexander took Archibetto's arm and walked him down the hall. "You have made a sublime effort, my son, and it is not for naught. I am most impressed by *Computos Fenestrum* and I predict great things for you as well. They will no longer call you 'Gloomy Gus.'"

Archibetto stared, nonplussed, marveling that the most powerful human being in Christendom had just used his childhood nickname. *Il Papa* laughed. "I have a very efficient intelligence service. They, too, will benefit from the genius of your labors, as will the Inquisition. Bad for the heretics, good for us.

"And do not fret about your contract with Magister Michelangelo. His considerable talents are now in our service, and we shall see that he is well supplied with your *Computos*."

Then *Il Papa's* face grew sad and thoughtful. "I also examined the *Computos Malum Opera* and interviewed Operarius at some length. I found them to be stronger in the area of graphics but with less flexibility of theory. This is significant — and politically unfortunate. You must not hold yourself in any way responsible for what must happen."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Holiness?"

"I told you, I read all of your technical abstracts, even the ones not meant for public consumption, and I believe that your product is superior. Good for you, bad for them."

ARCHIBETTO WAS never to forget those words. Two days later he and Portas were released and allowed to return to their workshops in Parma — with an order for *Computos* that would take five years to fill. They immediately set to expanding their workforce. Many of the new technicians came from *Computos Malum Opera,* but it took a special Papal dispensation to get them released from prison.

For, while *Computos Fenestrum* prospered, the demise of *Computos Malum Opera* was short and bloody. Operarius, Zucca, and many of their top lieutenants were taken by the Inquisition for examination, and, after suitable questioning, to the stake. Because if the Pope had decreed Portas's labors to be blessed of God, it must follow that Operarius and his works must be of the Devil. That was the way they thought, Archibetto realized. For every good there must be a corresponding evil, for to them life was painted in stark strokes of black and white.

But we shall change all of that, he mused. Soon, we shall bring them colors.

—For Don Calvert

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

PLEASE DO NOT COUNT ON THE POST OFFICE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUES AFTER YOU MOVE. IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS, PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE. BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT **www.fsfmag.com**

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE

Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kelly Link lives in Northhampton, Massachussetts, with her husband, Gavin Grant. Together, they run Small Beer Press and they also coedit the annual Year's Best Fantasy & Horror *anthology with Ellen Datlow. Ms. Link's short fiction, which has won the Nebula, Tiptree, and World Fantasy Awards, has appeared in such magazines as* Realms of Fantasy, Asimov's, Century, Conjunctions, *and* Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, *and has been collected in* Stranger Things Happen.

"Magic for Beginners" is the title story of her new collection, which should be in stores by the time you receive this issue. For beginners who have never encountered Ms. Link's fiction before, it's an excellent introduction to her magical storytelling skills—and whether you've discovered her work or not, we think you'll find this one a delight.

Magic for Beginners

By Kelly Link

FOX IS A TELEVISION CHARACTER, and she isn't dead yet. But she will be, soon. She's a character on a television show called *The Library*. You've never seen *The Library* on TV, but I bet you wish you had.

In one episode of *The Library*, a boy named Jeremy Mars, fifteen years old, sits on the roof of his house in Plantagenet, Vermont. It's eight o'clock at night, a school night, and he and his friend Elizabeth should be studying for the math quiz that their teacher, Mr. Cliff, has been hinting at all week long. Instead they've sneaked out onto the roof. It's cold. They don't know everything they should know about X, when X is the square root of Y. They don't even know Y. They ought to go in.

But there's nothing good on TV and the sky is very beautiful. They have jackets on, and up in the corners where the sky begins are patches of white in the darkness, still, where there's snow, up on the mountains. Down in the trees around the house, some animal is making a small, anxious sound: "Why cry? Why cry?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What's that one?" Elizabeth says, pointing at a squarish configuration of stars.

"That's The Parking Structure," Jeremy says. "And right next to that is The Big Shopping Mall and The Lesser Shopping Mall."

"And that's Orion, right? Orion the Bargain Hunter?"

Jeremy squints up. "No, Orion is over there. That's The Austrian Bodybuilder. That thing that's sort of wrapped around his lower leg is The Amorous Cephalopod. The Hungry, Hungry Octopus. It can't make up its mind whether it should eat him or make crazy, eight-legged love to him. You know that myth, right?"

"Of course," Elizabeth says. "Is Karl going to be pissed off that we didn't invite him over to study?"

"Karl's always pissed off about something," Jeremy says. Jeremy is resolutely resisting a notion about Elizabeth. Why are they sitting up here? Was it his idea or was it hers? Are they friends, are they just two friends sitting on the roof and talking? Or is Jeremy supposed to try to kiss her? He thinks maybe he's supposed to kiss her. If he kisses her, will they still be friends? He can't ask Karl about this. Karl doesn't believe in being helpful. Karl believes in mocking.

Jeremy doesn't even know if he wants to kiss Elizabeth. He's never thought about it until right now.

"I should go home," Elizabeth says. "There could be a new episode on right now, and we wouldn't even know."

"Someone would call and tell us," Jeremy says. "My mom would come up and yell for us." His mother is something else Jeremy doesn't want to worry about, but he does, he does.

Jeremy Mars knows a lot about the planet Mars, although he's never been there. He knows some girls, and yet he doesn't know much about them. He wishes there were books about girls, the way there are books about Mars, that you could observe the orbits and brightness of girls through telescopes without appearing to be perverted. Once Jeremy read a book about Mars out loud to Karl, except he kept replacing the word Mars with the word "girls." Karl cracked up every time.

Jeremy's mother is a librarian. His father writes books. Jeremy reads biographies. He plays trombone in a marching band. He jumps hurdles

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

while wearing a school tracksuit. Jeremy is also passionately addicted to a television show in which a renegade librarian and magician named Fox is trying to save her world from thieves, murderers, cabalists, and pirates. Jeremy is a geek, although he's a telegenic geek. Somebody should make a TV show about him.

Jeremy's friends call him Germ, although he would rather be called Mars. His parents haven't spoken to each other in a week.

Jeremy doesn't kiss Elizabeth. The stars don't fall out of the sky, and Jeremy and Elizabeth don't fall off the roof either. They go inside and finish their homework.

Someone who Jeremy has never met, never even heard of — a woman named Cleo Baldrick — has died. Lots of people, so far, have managed to live and die without making the acquaintance of Jeremy Mars, but Cleo Baldrick has left Jeremy Mars and his mother something strange in her will: a phone booth on a state highway, some forty miles outside of Las Vegas, and a Las Vegas wedding chapel. The wedding chapel is called Hell's Bells. Jeremy isn't sure what kind of people get married there. Bikers, maybe. Supervillains, freaks, and Satanists.

Jeremy's mother wants to tell him something. It's probably something about Las Vegas and about Cleo Baldrick, who — it turns out — was his mother's great-aunt. (Jeremy never knew his mother had a great-aunt. His mother is a mysterious person.) But it may be, on the other hand, something concerning Jeremy's father. For a week and a half now, Jeremy has managed to avoid finding out what his mother is worrying about. It's easy not to find out things, if you try hard enough. There's band practice. He has overslept on weekdays in order to rule out conversations at breakfast, and at night he climbs up on the roof with his telescope to look at stars, to look at Mars. His mother is afraid of heights. She grew up in L.A.

It's clear that whatever it is she has to tell Jeremy is not something she wants to tell him. As long as he avoids being alone with her, he's safe.

But it's hard to keep your guard up at all times. Jeremy comes home from school, feeling as if he has passed the math test after all. Jeremy is an optimist. Maybe there's something good on TV. He settles down with the remote control on one of his father's pet couches: oversized and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

re-upholstered in an orange-juice-colored corduroy that makes it appear as if the couch has just escaped from a maximum security prison for criminally insane furniture. This couch looks as if its hobby is devouring interior decorators. Jeremy's father is a horror writer, so no one should be surprised if some of the couches he reupholsters are hideous and eldritch.

Jeremy's mother comes into the room and stands above the couch, looking down at him. "Germ?" she says. She looks absolutely miserable, which is more or less how she has looked all week.

The phone rings and Jeremy jumps up.

As soon as he hears Elizabeth's voice, he knows. She says, "Germ, it's on. Channel forty-two. I'm taping it." She hangs up.

"It's on!" Jeremy says. "Channel forty-two! Now!"

His mother has the television on by the time he sits down. Being a librarian, she has a particular fondness for *The Library*. "I should go tell your dad," she says, but instead she sits down beside Jeremy. And of course it's now all the more clear something is wrong between Jeremy's parents. But *The Library* is on and Fox is about to rescue Prince Wing.

When the episode ends, he can tell without looking over that his mother is crying. "Don't mind me," she says and wipes her nose on her sleeve. "Do you think she's really dead?"

But Jeremy can't stay around and talk.

Jeremy has wondered about what kind of television shows the characters *in* television shows watch. Television characters almost always have better haircuts, funnier friends, simpler attitudes toward sex. They marry magicians, win lotteries, have affairs with women who carry guns in their purses. Curious things happen to them on an hourly basis. Jeremy and I can forgive their haircuts. We just want to ask them about their television shows.

Just like always, it's Elizabeth who worked out in the nick of time that the new episode was on. Everyone will show up at Elizabeth's house afterward, for the postmortem. This time, it really is a postmortem. Why did Prince Wing kill Fox? How could Fox let him do it? Fox is ten times stronger.

Jeremy runs all the way, slapping his old track shoes against the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sidewalk for the pleasure of the jar, for the sweetness of the sting. He likes the rough, cottony ache in his lungs. His coach says you have to be part-masochist to enjoy something like running. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's something to exploit.

Talis opens the door. She grins at him, although he can tell that she's been crying, too. She's wearing a T-shirt that says *I'm So Goth I Shit Tiny Vampires.*

"Hey," Jeremy says. Talis nods. Talis isn't so Goth, at least not as far as Jeremy or anyone else knows. Talis just has a lot of T-shirts. She's an enigma wrapped in a mysterious T-shirt. A woman once said to Calvin Coolidge, "Mr. President, I bet my husband that I could get you to say more than two words." Coolidge said, "You lose." Jeremy can imagine Talis as Calvin Coolidge in a former life. Or maybe she was one of those dogs that don't bark. A basenji. Or a rock. A dolmen. There was an episode of *The Library*, once, with some sinister dancing dolmens in it.

Elizabeth comes up behind Talis. If Talis is unGoth, then Elizabeth is Ballerina Goth. She likes hearts and skulls and black pen-ink tattoos, pink tulle, and Hello Kitty. When the woman who invented Hello Kitty was asked why Hello Kitty was so popular, she said, "Because she has no mouth." Elizabeth's mouth is small. Her lips are chapped.

"That was the most horrible episode ever! I cried and cried," she says. "Hey, Germ, so I was telling Talis about how you inherited a gas station."

"A phone booth," Jeremy says. "In Las Vegas. This great-great-aunt died. And there's a wedding chapel, too."

"Hey! Germ!" Karl says, yelling from the living room. "Shut up and get in here! The commercial with the talking cats is on — "

"Shut it, Karl," Jeremy says. He goes in and sits on Karl's head. You have to show Karl who's boss once in a while.

Amy turns up last. She was in the next town over, buying comics. She hasn't seen the new episode and so they all shut it (except for Talis, who has not been saying anything at all) and Elizabeth puts on the tape.

In the previous episode of *The Library*, masked pirate-magicians said they would sell Prince Wing a cure for the spell that infested Faithful Margaret's hair with miniature, wicked, fire-breathing golems. (Faithful Margaret's hair keeps catching fire, but she refuses to shave it off. Her hair is the source of all her magic.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The pirate-magicians lured Prince Wing into a trap so obvious that it seemed impossible it could really be a trap, on the one-hundred-and-fortieth floor of The Free People's World-Tree Library. The pirate-magicians used finger magic to turn Prince Wing into a porcelain teapot, put two Earl Grey tea bags into the teapot, and poured in boiling water, toasted the Eternally Postponed and Overdue Reign of the Forbidden Books, drained their tea in one gulp, belched, hurled their souvenir pirate mugs to the ground, and then shattered the teapot, which had been Prince Wing, into hundreds of pieces. Then the wicked pirate-magicians swept the pieces of both Prince Wing and collectable mugs carelessly into a wooden cigar box, buried the box in the Angela Carter Memorial Park on the seventeenth floor of The World-Tree Library, and erected a statue of George Washington above it.

So then Fox had to go looking for Prince Wing. When she finally discovered the park on the seventeenth floor of the Library, the George Washington statue stepped down off his plinth and fought her tooth and nail. Literally tooth and nail, and they'd all agreed that there was something especially nightmarish about a biting, scratching, life-sized statue of George Washington with long, pointed metal fangs that threw off sparks when he gnashed them. The statue of George Washington bit Fox's pinky finger right off, just like Gollum biting Frodo's finger off on the top of Mount Doom. But of course, once the statue tasted Fox's magical blood, it fell in love with Fox. It would be her ally from now on.

In the new episode, the actor playing Fox is a young Latina actress whom Jeremy Mars thinks he recognizes. She has been a snotty but well-intentioned fourth-floor librarian in an episode about an epidemic of food-poisoning that triggered bouts of invisibility and/or levitation, and she was also a lovelorn, suicidal Bear Cult priestess in the episode where Prince Wing discovered his mother was one of the Forbidden Books.

This is one of the best things about *The Library*, the way the cast swaps parts, all except for Faithful Margaret and Prince Wing, who are only ever themselves. Faithful Margaret and Prince Wing are the love interests and the main characters, and therefore, inevitably, the most boring characters, although Amy has a crush on Prince Wing.

Fox and the dashing-but-treacherous pirate-magician Two Devils are never played by the same actor twice, although in the twenty-third

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

episode of *The Library*, the same woman played them both. Jeremy supposes that the casting could be perpetually confusing, but instead it makes your brain catch on fire. It's magical.

You always know Fox by her costume (the too-small green T-shirt, the long, full skirts she wears to hide her tail), by her dramatic hand gestures and body language, by the soft, breathy-squeaky voice the actors use when they are Fox. Fox is funny, dangerous, bad-tempered, flirtatious, greedy, untidy, accident-prone, graceful, and has a mysterious past. In some episodes, Fox is played by male actors, but she always sounds like Fox. And she's always beautiful. Every episode you think that this Fox, surely, is the most beautiful Fox there could ever be, and yet the Fox of the next episode will be even more heartbreakingly beautiful.

On television, it's night in The Free People's World-Tree Library. All the librarians are asleep, tucked into their coffins, their scabbards, priest-holes, buttonholes, pockets, hidden cupboards, between the pages of their enchanted novels. Moonlight pours through the high, arched windows of the Library and between the aisles of shelves, into the park. Fox is on her knees, clawing at the muddy ground with her bare hands. The statue of George Washington kneels beside her, helping.

"So that's Fox, right?" Amy says. Nobody tells her to shut up. It would be pointless. Amy has a large heart and an even larger mouth. When it rains, Amy rescues worms off the sidewalk. When you get tired of having a secret, you tell Amy.

Understand: Amy isn't that much stupider than anyone else in this story. It's just that she thinks out loud.

Elizabeth's mother comes into the living room. "Hey guys," she says. "Hi, Jeremy. Did I hear something about your mother inheriting a wedding chapel?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jeremy says. "In Las Vegas."

"Las Vegas," Elizabeth's mom says. "I won three hundred bucks once in Las Vegas. Spent it on a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon. So how many times can you guys watch the same episode in one day?" But she sits down to watch, too. "Do you think she's really dead?"

"Who's dead?" Amy says. Nobody says anything.

Jeremy isn't sure he's ready to see this episode again so soon, anyway, especially not with Amy. He goes upstairs and takes a shower. Elizabeth's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

family have a large and distracting selection of shampoos. They don't mind when Jeremy uses their bathroom.

JEREMY AND KARL and Elizabeth have known each other since the first day of kindergarten. Amy and Talis are a year younger. The five have not always been friends, except for Jeremy and Karl, who have. Talis is, famously, a loner. She doesn't listen to music as far as anyone knows, she doesn't wear significant amounts of black, she isn't particularly good (or bad) at math or English, and she doesn't drink, debate, knit or refuse to eat meat. If she keeps a blog, she's never admitted it to anyone.

The Library made Jeremy and Karl and Talis and Elizabeth and Amy friends. No one else in school is as passionately devoted. Besides, they are all the children of former hippies, and the town is small. They all live within a few blocks of each other, in run-down Victorians with high ceilings and ranch houses with sunken living rooms. And although they have not always been friends, growing up, they've gone skinny-dipping in lakes on summer nights, and broken bones on each others' trampolines. Once, during an argument about dog names, Elizabeth, who is hot-tempered, tried to run Jeremy over with her ten-speed bicycle, and once, a year ago, Karl got drunk on green-apple schnapps at a party and tried to kiss Talis, and once, for five months in the seventh grade, Karl and Jeremy communicated only through angry e-mails written in all caps. I'm not allowed to tell you what they fought about.

Now the five are inseparable; invincible. They imagine that life will always be like this — like a television show in eternal syndication — that they will always have each other. They use the same vocabulary. They borrow each other's books and music. They share lunches, and they never say anything when Jeremy comes over and takes a shower. They all know Jeremy's father is eccentric. He's supposed to be eccentric. He's a novelist.

When Jeremy comes back downstairs, Amy is saying, "I've always thought there was something wicked about Prince Wing. He's a dork and he looks like he has bad breath. I never really liked him."

Karl says, "We don't know the whole story yet. Maybe he found out something about Fox while he was a teapot." Elizabeth's mom says, "He's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

under a spell. I bet you anything." They'll be talking about it all week.

Talis is in the kitchen, making a Velveeta-and-pickle sandwich.

"So what did you think?" Jeremy says. It's like having a hobby, only more pointless, trying to get Talis to talk. "Is Fox really dead?"

"Don't know," Talis says. Then she says, "I had a dream."

Jeremy waits. Talis seems to be waiting, too. She says, "About you." Then she's silent again. There is something dreamlike about the way that she makes a sandwich. As if she is really making something that isn't a sandwich at all; as if she's making something far more meaningful and mysterious. Or as if soon he will wake up and realize that there are no such things as sandwiches.

"You and Fox," Talis says. "The dream was about the two of you. She told me. To tell you. To call her. She gave me a phone number. She was in trouble. She said you were in trouble. She said *to keep in touch.*"

"Weird," Jeremy says, mulling this over. He's never had a dream about *The Library*. He wonders who was playing Fox in Talis's dream. He had a dream about Talis, once, but it isn't the kind of dream that you'd ever tell anybody about. They were just sitting together, not saying anything. Even Talis's T-shirt hadn't said anything. Talis was holding his hand.

"It didn't feel like a dream," Talis says.

"So what was the phone number?" Jeremy says.

"I forgot," Talis says. "When I woke up, I forgot."

Kurt's mother works in a bank. Talis's father has a karaoke machine in his basement, and he knows all the lyrics to "Like a Virgin" and "Holiday" as well as the lyrics to all the songs from *Godspell* and *Cabaret*. Talis's mother is a licensed therapist who composes multiple-choice personality tests for women's magazines. "Discover Which Television Character You Resemble Most." Etc. Amy's parents met in a commune in Ithaca: her name was Galadriel Moon Shuyler before her parents came to their senses and had it changed legally. Everyone is sworn to secrecy about this, which is ironic, considering that this is Amy.

But Jeremy's father is Gordon Strangle Mars. He writes novels about giant spiders, giant leeches, giant moths, and once, notably, a giant carnivorous rosebush who lives in a mansion in upstate New York, and falls in love with a plucky, teenaged girl with a heart murmur. Saint

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bernard–sized spiders chase his characters' cars down dark, bumpy country roads. They fight the spiders off with badminton rackets, lawn tools, and fireworks. The novels with spiders are all bestsellers.

Once a Gordon Strangle Mars fan broke into the Mars's house. The fan stole several German first editions of Gordon Strangle's novels, a hairbrush, and a used mug in which there were two ancient, dehydrated tea bags. The fan left behind a betrayed and abusive letter on a series of Post-It Notes, and the manuscript of his own novel, told from the point of view of the iceberg that sank the Titanic. Jeremy and his mother read the manuscript out loud to each other. It begins: "The iceberg knew it had a destiny." Jeremy's favorite bit happens when the iceberg sees the doomed ship drawing nearer, and remarks plaintively, "Oh my, does not the Captain know about my large and impenetrable bottom?"

Jeremy discovered, later, that the novel-writing fan had put Gordon Strangle Mars's used tea bags and hairbrush up for sale on eBay, where someone paid forty-two dollars and sixty-eight cents, which was not only deeply creepy, but, Jeremy still feels, somewhat cheap. But of course this is appropriate, as Jeremy's father is famously stingy and just plain weird about money.

Gordon Strangle Mars once spent eight thousand dollars on a Japanese singing toilet. Jeremy's friends love that toilet. Jeremy's mother has a painting of a woman wearing a red dress by some artist, Jeremy can never remember who. Jeremy's father gave her that painting. The woman is beautiful, and she looks right at you as if you're the painting, not her. As if *you're* beautiful. The woman has an apple in one hand and a knife in the other. When Jeremy was little, he used to dream about eating that apple. Apparently the painting is worth more than the whole house and everything else in the house, including the singing toilet. But art and toilets aside, the Marses buy most of their clothes at thrift stores.

Jeremy's father clips coupons.

On the other hand, when Jeremy was twelve and begged his parents to send him to baseball camp in Florida, his father ponied up. And on Jeremy's last birthday, his father gave him a couch reupholstered in several dozen yards of heavy-duty *Star Wars*-themed fabric. That was a good birthday.

When his writing is going well, Gordon Strangle Mars likes to wake

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up at 6 A.M. and go out driving. He works out new plot lines about giant spiders and keeps an eye out for abandoned couches, which he wrestles into the back of his pickup truck. Then he writes for the rest of the day. On weekends he reupholsters the thrown-away couches in remaindered, discount fabrics. A few years ago, Jeremy went through his house, counting up fourteen couches, eight love seats, and one rickety chaise lounge. That was a few years ago. Once Jeremy had a dream that his father combined his two careers and began reupholstering giant spiders.

All lights in all rooms of the Mars house are on fifteen-minute timers, in case Jeremy or his mother leave a room and forget to turn off a lamp. This has caused confusion — and sometimes panic — on the rare occasions that the Marses throw dinner parties.

Everyone thinks that writers are rich, but it seems to Jeremy that his family is only rich some of the time. Some of the time they aren't.

Whenever Gordon Mars gets stuck in a Gordon Strangle Mars novel, he worries about money. He worries that he won't, in fact, manage to finish the current novel. He worries that it will be terrible. He worries that no one will buy it and no one will read it, and that the readers who do read it will demand to be refunded the cost of the book. He's told Jeremy that he imagines these angry readers marching on the Mars house, carrying torches and crowbars.

It would be easier on Jeremy and his mother if Gordon Mars did not work at home. It's difficult to shower when you know your father is timing you, and thinking dark thoughts about the water bill, instead of concentrating on the scene in the current Gordon Strangle Mars novel, in which the giant spiders have returned to their old haunts in the trees surrounding the ninth hole of the accursed golf course, where they sullenly feast on the pulped entrail-juices of a brace of unlucky poodles and their owner.

During these periods, Jeremy showers at school, after gym, or at his friends' houses, even though it makes his mother unhappy. She says that sometimes you just need to ignore Jeremy's father. She takes especially long showers, lots of baths. She claims that baths are even nicer when you know that Jeremy's father is worried about the water bill. Jeremy's mother has a cruel streak.

What Jeremy likes about showers is the way you can stand there, surrounded by water and yet in absolutely no danger of drowning, and not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

think about things like whether you screwed up on the Spanish assignment, or why your mother is looking so worried. Instead you can think about things like if there's water on Mars, and whether or not Karl is shaving, and if so, who is he trying to fool, and what the statue of George Washington meant when it said to Fox, during their desperate, bloody fight, "You have a long journey ahead of you," and, "Everything depends on this." And is Fox really dead?

After she dug up the cigar box, and after George Washington helped her carefully separate out the pieces of tea mug from the pieces of teapot, after they glued back together the hundreds of pieces of porcelain, when Fox turned the ramshackle teapot back into Prince Wing, Prince Wing looked about a hundred years old, and as if maybe there were still a few pieces missing. He looked pale. When he saw Fox, he turned even paler, as if he hadn't expected her to be standing there in front of him. He picked up his leviathan sword, which Fox had been keeping safe for him — the one which faithful viewers know was carved out of the tooth of a giant, ancient sea creature that lived happily and peacefully (before Prince Wing was tricked into killing it) in the enchanted underground sea on the third floor — and skewered the statue of George Washington like a kebab, pinning it to a tree. He kicked Fox in the head, knocked her down, and tied her to a card catalog. He stuffed a handful of moss and dirt into her mouth so she couldn't say anything, and then he accused her of plotting to murder Faithful Margaret by magic. He said Fox was more deceitful than a Forbidden Book. He cut off Fox's tail and her ears and he ran her through with the poison-edged, dog-headed knife that he and Fox had stolen from his mother's secret house. Then he left Fox there, tied to the card catalog, limp and bloody, her beautiful head hanging down. He sneezed (Prince Wing is allergic to swordplay) and walked off into the stacks. The librarians crept out of their hiding places. They untied Fox and cleaned off her face. They held a mirror to her mouth, but the mirror stayed clear and unclouded.

When the librarians pulled Prince Wing's leviathan sword out of the tree, the statue of George Washington staggered over and picked up Fox in his arms. He tucked her ears and tail into the capacious pockets of his bird-shit-stained, verdigris riding coat. He carried Fox down seventeen flights of stairs, past the enchanted-and-disagreeable Sphinx on the eighth floor,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

past the enchanted-and-stormy underground sea on the third floor, past the even-more-enchanted checkout desk on the first floor, and through the hammered-brass doors of the Free People's World Tree Library. Nobody in *The Library*, not in one single episode, has ever gone outside. The Library is full of all the sorts of things that one usually has to go outside to enjoy: trees and lakes and grottoes and fields and mountains and precipices (and full of indoors things as well, like books, of course). Outside The Library, everything is dusty and red and alien, as if George Washington has carried Fox out of The Library and onto the surface of Mars.

❦

"I could really go for a nice cold Euphoria right now," Jeremy says. He and Karl are walking home.

Euphoria is: *The Librarian's Tonic — When Watchfulness Is Not Enough.* There are frequently commercials for Euphoria on *The Library.* Although no one is exactly sure what Euphoria is for, whether it is alcoholic or caffeinated, what it tastes like, if it is poisonous or delightful, or even whether or not it's carbonated, everyone, including Jeremy, pines for a glass of Euphoria once in a while.

"Can I ask you a question?" Karl says.

"Why do you always say that?" Jeremy says. "What am I going to say? 'No, you can't ask me a question?'"

"What's up with you and Talis?" Karl says. "What were you talking about in the kitchen?" Jeremy sees that Karl has been Watchful.

"She had this dream about me," he says, uneasily.

"So do you like her?" Karl says. His chin looks raw. Jeremy is sure now that Karl has tried to shave. "Because, remember how I liked her first?"

"We were just talking," Jeremy says. "So did you shave? Because I didn't know you had facial hair. The idea of you shaving is pathetic, Karl. It's like voting Republican if we were old enough to vote. Or farting in Music Appreciation."

"Don't try to change the subject," Karl says. "When have you and Talis ever had a conversation before?"

"One time we talked about a Diana Wynne Jones book that she'd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

checked out from the library. She dropped it in the bath accidentally. She wanted to know if I could tell my mother," Jeremy says. "Once we talked about recycling."

"Shut up, Germ," Karl says. "Besides, what about Elizabeth? I thought you liked Elizabeth!"

"Who said that?" Jeremy says. Karl is glaring at him.

"Amy told me," Karl says.

"I never told Amy I liked Elizabeth," Jeremy says. So now Amy is a mind-reader as well as a blabbermouth? What a terrible, deadly combination!

"No," Karl says, grudgingly. "Elizabeth told Amy that she likes you. So I just figured you liked her back."

"Elizabeth likes me?" Jeremy says.

"Apparently everybody likes you," Karl says. He sounds sorry for himself. "What is it about you? It's not like you're all that special. Your nose is funny looking and you have stupid hair."

"Thanks, Karl." Jeremy changes the subject. "Do you think Fox is really dead?" he says. "For good?" He walks faster, so that Karl has to almost-jog to keep up. Presently Jeremy is much taller than Karl, and he intends to enjoy this as long as it lasts. Knowing Karl, he'll either get tall, too, or else chop Jeremy off at the knees.

"They'll use magic," Karl says. "Or maybe it was all a dream. They'll make her alive again. I'll never forgive them if they've killed Fox. And if you like Talis, I'll never forgive you, either. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I think I mean what I say, but if push came to shove, eventually I'd forgive you, and we'd be friends again, like in seventh grade. But I wouldn't, and you're wrong, and we wouldn't be. We wouldn't ever be friends again."

Jeremy doesn't say anything. Of course he likes Talis. He just hasn't realized how much he likes her, until recently. Until today. Until Karl opened his mouth. Jeremy likes Elizabeth too, but how can you compare Elizabeth and Talis? You can't. Elizabeth is Elizabeth and Talis is Talis.

"When you tried to kiss Talis, she hit you with a boa constrictor," he says. It had been Amy's boa constrictor. It had probably been an accident. Karl shouldn't have tried to kiss someone while they were holding a boa constrictor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just try to remember what I just said," Karl says. "You're free to like anyone you want to. Anyone except for Talis."

The Library has been on television for two years now. It isn't a regularly scheduled program. Sometimes it's on two times in the same week, and then not on again for another couple of weeks. Often new episodes debut in the middle of the night. There is a large online community who spend hours scanning channels; sending out alarms and false alarms; fans swap theories, tapes, files; write fanfic. Elizabeth has rigged up her computer to shout "Wake up, Elizabeth! The television is on fire!" when reliable *Library* watch-sites discover a new episode.

The Library is a pirate TV show. It's shown up once or twice on most network channels, but usually it's on the kind of channels that Jeremy thinks of as ghost channels. The ones that are just static, unless you're paying for several hundred channels of cable. There are commercial breaks, but the products being advertised are like Euphoria. They never seem to be real brands, or things that you can actually buy. Often the commercials aren't even in English, or in any other identifiable language, although the jingles are catchy, nonsense or not. They get stuck in your head.

Episodes of *The Library* have no regular schedule, no credits, and sometimes not even dialogue. One episode of *The Library* takes place inside the top drawer of a card catalog, in pitch dark, and it's all in Morse code with subtitles. Nothing else. No one has ever claimed responsibility for inventing *The Library*. No one has ever interviewed one of the actors, or stumbled across a set, film crew, or script, although in one documentary-style episode, the actors filmed the crew, who all wore paper bags on their heads.

When Jeremy gets home, his father is making upside-down pizza in a casserole dish for dinner.

Meeting writers is usually disappointing at best. Writers who write sexy thrillers aren't necessarily sexy or thrilling in person. Children's book writers might look more like accountants, or axe murderers for that matter. Horror writers are very rarely scary looking, although they are frequently good cooks.

Though Gordon Strangle Mars *is* scary looking. He has long, thin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fingers — currently slimy with pizza sauce — which are why he chose "Strangle" for his fake middle name. He has white-blond hair that he tugs on while he writes until it stands straight up. He has a bad habit of suddenly appearing beside you, when you haven't even realized he was in the same part of the house. His eyes are deep-set and he doesn't blink very often. Karl says that when you meet Jeremy's father, he looks at you as if he were imagining you bundled up and stuck away in some giant spider's larder. Which is probably true.

People who read books probably never bother to wonder if their favorite writers are also good parents. Why would they?

Gordon Strangle Mars is a recreational shoplifter. He has a special, complicated, and unspoken arrangement with the local bookstore, where, in exchange for autographing as many Gordon Strangle Mars novels as they can possibly sell, the store allows Jeremy's father to shoplift books without comment. Jeremy's mother shows up sooner or later and writes a check.

Jeremy's feelings about his father are complicated. His father is a cheapskate and a petty thief, and yet Jeremy likes his father. His father hardly ever loses his temper with Jeremy, he is always interested in Jeremy's life, and he gives interesting (if confusing) advice when Jeremy asks for it. For example, if Jeremy asked his father about kissing Elizabeth, his father might suggest that Jeremy not worry about giant spiders when he kisses Elizabeth. Jeremy's father's advice usually has something to do with giant spiders.

When Jeremy and Karl weren't speaking to each other, it was Jeremy's father who straightened them out. He lured Karl over, and then locked them both into his study. He didn't let them out again until they were on speaking terms.

"I thought of a great idea for your book," Jeremy says. "What if one of the spiders builds a web on a soccer field, across a goal? And what if the goalie doesn't notice until the middle of the game? Could somebody kill one of the spiders with a soccer ball, if they kicked it hard enough? Would it explode? Or even better, the spider could puncture the soccer ball with its massive fangs. That would be cool, too."

"Your mother's out in the garage," Gordon Strangle Mars says to Jeremy. "She wants to talk to you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh," Jeremy says. All of a sudden, he thinks of Fox in Talis's dream, trying to phone him. Trying to warn him. Unreasonably, he feels that it's his parents' fault that Fox is dead now, as if they have killed her. "Is it about you? Are you getting divorced?"

"I don't know," his father says. He hunches his shoulders. He makes a face. It's a face that Jeremy's father makes frequently, and yet this face is even more pitiful and guilty than usual.

"What did you do?" Jeremy says. "Did you get caught shoplifting at Wal-Mart?"

"No," his father says.

"Did you have an affair?"

"No!" his father says, again. Now he looks disgusted, either with himself or with Jeremy for asking such a horrible question. "I screwed up. Let's leave it at that."

"How's the book coming?" Jeremy says. There is something in his father's voice that makes him feel like kicking something, but there are never giant spiders around when you need them.

"I don't want to talk about that, either," his father says, looking, if possible, even more ashamed. "Go tell your mother dinner will be ready in five minutes. Maybe you and I can watch the new episode of *The Library* after dinner, if you haven't already seen it a thousand times."

"Do you know the end? Did Mom tell you that Fox is — "

"Oh jeez," his father interrupts. "They killed Fox?"

That's the problem with being a writer, Jeremy knows. Even the biggest and most startling twists are rarely twists for you. You know how every story goes.

Jeremy's mother is an orphan. Jeremy's father claims that she was raised by feral silent-film stars, and it's true, she looks like a heroine out of a Harold Lloyd movie. She has an appealingly disheveled look to her, as if someone has either just tied or untied her from a set of train tracks. She met Gordon Mars (before he added the Strangle and sold his first novel) in the food court of a mall in New Jersey, and fell in love with him before realizing that he was a writer and a recreational shoplifter. She didn't read anything he'd written until after they were married, which was a typically cunning move on Jeremy's father's part.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeremy's mother doesn't read horror novels. She doesn't like ghost stories or unexplained phenomena or even the kind of phenomena that require excessively technical explanations. For example: microwaves, airplanes. She doesn't like Halloween, not even Halloween candy. Jeremy's father gives her special editions of his novels, where the scary pages have been glued together.

Jeremy's mother is quiet more often than not. Her name is Alice and sometimes Jeremy thinks about how the two quietest people he knows are named Alice and Talis. But his mother and Talis are quiet in different ways. Jeremy's mother is the kind of person who seems to be keeping something hidden, something secret. Whereas Talis just *is* a secret. Jeremy's mother could easily turn out to be a secret agent. But Talis is the death ray or the key to immortality or whatever it is that secret agents have to keep secret. Hanging out with Talis is like hanging out with a teenage black hole.

Jeremy's mother is sitting on the floor of the garage, beside a large cardboard box. She has a photo album in her hands. Jeremy sits down beside her.

There are photographs of a cat on a wall, and something blurry that looks like a whale or a zeppelin or a loaf of bread. There's a photograph of a small girl sitting beside a woman. The woman wears a fur collar with a sharp little muzzle, four legs, a tail, and Jeremy feels a sudden pang. Fox is the first dead person that he's ever cared about, but she's not real. The little girl in the photograph looks utterly blank, as if someone has just hit her with a hammer. Like the person behind the camera has just said, "Smile! Your parents are dead!"

"Cleo," Jeremy's mother says, pointing to the woman. "That's Cleo. She was my mother's aunt. She lived in Los Angeles. I went to live with her when my parents died. I was four. I know I've never talked about her. I've never really known what to say about her."

Jeremy says, "Was she nice?"

His mother says, "She tried to be nice. She didn't expect to be saddled with a little girl. What an odd word. Saddled. As if she were a horse. As if somebody put me on her back and I never got off again. She liked to buy clothes for me. She liked clothes. She hadn't had a happy life. She drank a lot. She liked to go to movies in the afternoon and to seances in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evenings. She had boyfriends. Some of them were jerks. The love of her life was a small-time gangster. He died and she never married. She always said marriage was a joke and that life was a bigger joke, and it was just her bad luck that she didn't have a sense of humor. So it's strange to think that all these years she was running a wedding chapel."

Jeremy looks at his mother. She's half-smiling, half-grimacing, as if her stomach hurts. "I ran away when I was sixteen. And I never saw her again. Once she sent me a letter, care of your father's publishers. She said she'd read all his books, and that was how she found me, I guess, because he kept dedicating them to me. She said she hoped I was happy and that she thought about me. I wrote back. I sent a photograph of you. But she never wrote again. Sounds like an episode of *The Library,* doesn't it?"

Jeremy says, "Is that what you wanted to tell me? Dad said you wanted to tell me something."

"That's part of it," his mother says. "I have to go out to Las Vegas, to find out some things about this wedding chapel. Hell's Bells. I want you to come with me."

"Is that what you wanted to ask me?" Jeremy says, although he knows there's something else. His mother still has that sad half-smile on her face.

"Germ," his mother says. "You know I love your father, right?"

"Why?" Jeremy says. "What did he do?"

His mother flips through the photo album. "Look," she says. "This was when you were born." In the picture, his father holds Jeremy as if someone has just handed him an enchanted porcelain teapot. Jeremy's father grins, but he looks terrified, too. He looks like a kid. A scary, scared kid.

"He wouldn't tell me either," Jeremy says. "So it has to be pretty bad. If you're getting divorced, I think you should go ahead and tell me."

"We're not getting divorced," his mother says, "but it might be a good thing if you and I went out to Las Vegas. We could stay there for a few months while I sort out this inheritance. Take care of Cleo's estate. I'm going to talk to your teachers. I've given notice at the library. Think of it as an adventure."

She sees the look on Jeremy's face. "No, I'm sorry. That was a stupid, stupid thing to say. I know this isn't an adventure."

"I don't want to go," Jeremy says. "All my friends are here! I can't just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

go away and leave them. That would be terrible!" All this time, he's been preparing himself for the most terrible thing he can imagine. He's imagined a conversation with his mother, in which his mother reveals her terrible secret, and in his imagination, he's been calm and reasonable. His imaginary parents have wept and asked for his understanding. The imaginary Jeremy has understood. He has imagined himself understanding everything. But now, as his mother talks, Jeremy's heartbeat speeds up, and his lungs fill with air, as if he is running. He starts to sweat, although the floor of the garage is cold. He wishes he were sitting up on top of the roof with his telescope. There could be meteors, invisible to the naked eye, careening through the sky, hurtling toward Earth. Fox is dead. Everyone he knows is doomed. Even as he thinks this, he knows he's overreacting. But it doesn't help to know this.

"I know it's terrible," his mother says. His mother knows something about terrible.

"So why can't I stay here?" Jeremy says. "You go sort things out in Las Vegas, and I'll stay here with Dad. Why can't I stay here?"

"Because he put you in a book!" his mother says. She spits the words out. He has never heard her sound so angry. His mother never gets angry. "He put you in one of his books! I was in his office, and the manuscript was on his desk. I saw your name, and so I picked it up and started reading."

"So what?" Jeremy says. "He's put me in his books before. Like, stuff I've said. Like when I was eight and I was running a fever and told him the trees were full of dead people wearing party hats. Like when I accidentally set fire to his office."

"It isn't like that," his mother says. "It's you. It's *you*. He hasn't even changed your name. The boy in the book, he jumps hurdles and he wants to be a rocket scientist and go to Mars, and he's cute and funny and sweet and his best friend Elizabeth is in love with him and he talks like you and he looks like you and then he dies, Jeremy. He has a brain tumor and he dies. He dies. There aren't any giant spiders. There's just you, and you die."

Jeremy is silent. He imagines his father writing the scene in his book where the kid named Jeremy dies, and crying, just a little. He imagines this Jeremy kid, Jeremy the character who dies. Poor messed-up kid. Now Jeremy and Fox have something in common. They're both made-up people. They're both dead.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Elizabeth is in love with me?" he says. Just on principle, he never believes anything that Karl says. But if it's in a book, maybe it's true.

"Oh, whoops," his mother says. "I really didn't want to say that. I'm just so angry at him. We've been married for seventeen years. I was just four years older than you when I met him, Jeremy. I was nineteen. He was only twenty. We were babies. Can you imagine that? I can put up with the singing toilet and the shoplifting and the couches and I can put up with him being so weird about money. But he killed you, Jeremy. He wrote you into a book and he killed you off. And he knows it was wrong, too. He's ashamed of himself. He didn't want me to tell you. I didn't mean to tell you."

Jeremy sits and thinks. "I still don't want to go to Las Vegas," he says to his mother. "Maybe we could send Dad there instead."

His mother says, "Not a bad idea." But he can tell she's already planning their itinerary.

IN ONE EPISODE of *The Library*, everyone was invisible. You couldn't see the actors: you could only see the books and the bookshelves and the study carrels on the fifth floor where the coin-operated wizards come to flirt and practice their spells. Invisible Forbidden Books were fighting invisible pirate-magicians and the pirate-magicians were fighting Fox and her friends, who were also invisible. The fight was clumsy and full of deadly accidents. You could hear them fighting. Shelves were overturned. Books were thrown. Invisible people tripped over invisible dead bodies, but you didn't find out who'd died until the next episode. Several of the characters — The Accidental Sword, Hairy Pete, and Ptolemy Krill (who, much like the Vogons in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, wrote poetry so bad it killed anyone who read it) — disappeared for good, and nobody is sure whether they're dead or not.

In another episode, Fox stole a magical drug from The Norns, a prophetic girl band who headline at a cabaret on the mezzanine of The Free People's World-Tree Library. She accidentally injected it, became pregnant, and gave birth to a bunch of snakes who led her to the exact shelf where renegade librarians had misshelved an ancient and terrible book of magic which had never been translated, until Fox asked the snakes for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

help. The snakes writhed and curled on the ground, spelling out words, letter by letter, with their bodies. As they translated the book for Fox, they hissed and steamed. They became fiery lines on the ground, and then they burnt away entirely. Fox cried. That's the only time anyone has ever seen Fox cry, ever. She isn't like Prince Wing. Prince Wing is a crybaby.

The thing about *The Library* is that characters don't come back when they die. It's as if death is for real. So maybe Fox really is dead and she really isn't coming back. There are a couple of ghosts who hang around the Library looking for blood libations, but they've always been ghosts, all the way back to the beginning of the show. There aren't any evil twins or vampires, either. Although someday, hopefully, there will be evil twins. Who doesn't love evil twins?

"Mom told me about how you wrote about me," Jeremy says. His mother is still in the garage. He feels like a tennis ball in a game where the tennis players love him very, very much, even while they lob and smash and send him back and forth, back and forth.

His father says, "She said she wasn't going to tell you, but I guess I'm glad she did. I'm sorry, Germ. Are you hungry?"

"She's going out to Las Vegas next week. She wants me to go with her," Jeremy says.

"I know," his father says, still holding out a bowl of upside-down pizza. "Try not to worry about all of this, if you can. Think of it as an adventure."

"Mom says that's a stupid thing to say. Are you going to let me read the book with me in it?" Jeremy says.

"No," his father says, looking straight at Jeremy. "I burned it."

"Really?" Jeremy says. "Did you set fire to your computer too?"

"Well, no," his father says. "But you can't read it. It wasn't any good, anyway. Want to watch *The Library* with me? And will you eat some damn pizza, please? I may be a lousy father, but I'm a good cook. And if you love me, you'll eat the damn pizza and be grateful."

So they go sit on the orange couch and Jeremy eats pizza and watches *The Library* for the second-and-a-half time with his father. The lights on the timer in the living room go off, and Prince Wing kills Fox again. And then Jeremy goes to bed. His father goes away to write or to burn stuff. Whatever. His mother is still out in the garage.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On Jeremy's desk is a scrap of paper with a phone number on it. If he wanted to, he could call his phone booth. When he dials the number, it rings for a long time. Jeremy sits on his bed in the dark and listens to it ringing and ringing. When someone picks it up, he almost hangs up. Someone doesn't say anything, so Jeremy says, "Hello? Hello?"

Someone breathes into the phone on the other end of the line. Someone says in a soft, musical, squeaky voice, "Can't talk now, kid. Call back later." Then someone hangs up.

Jeremy dreams that he's sitting beside Fox on a sofa that his father has reupholstered in spider silk. His father has been stealing spider webs from the giant-spider superstores. From his own books. Is that shoplifting or is it self-plagiarism? The sofa is soft and gray and a little bit sticky. Fox sits on either side of him. The right-hand-side Fox is being played by Talis. Elizabeth plays the Fox on his left. Both Foxes look at him with enormous compassion.

"Are you dead?" Jeremy says.

"Are you?" the Fox who is being played by Elizabeth says, in that unmistakable Fox voice which, Jeremy's father once said, sounds like a sexy and demented helium balloon. It makes Jeremy's brain hurt, to hear Fox's voice coming out of Elizabeth's mouth.

The Fox who looks like Talis doesn't say anything at all. The writing on her T-shirt is so small and so foreign that Jeremy can't read it without feeling as if he's staring at Fox-Talis's breasts. It's probably something he needs to know, but he'll never be able to read it. He's too polite, and besides he's terrible at foreign languages.

"Hey look," Jeremy says. "We're on TV!" There he is on television, sitting between two Foxes on a sticky gray couch in a field of red poppies. "Are we in Las Vegas?"

"We're not in Kansas," Fox-Elizabeth says. "There's something I need you to do for me."

"What's that?" Jeremy says.

"If I tell you in the dream," Fox-Elizabeth says, "you won't remember. You have to remember to call me when you're awake. Keep on calling until you get me."

"How will I remember to call you," Jeremy says, "if I don't remember

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what you tell me in this dream? Why do you need me to help you? Why is Talis here? What does her T-shirt say? Why are you both Fox? Is this Mars?"

Fox-Talis goes on watching TV. Fox-Elizabeth opens her kind and beautiful un-Hello-Kitty-like mouth again. She tells Jeremy the whole story. She explains everything. She translates Fox-Talis's T-shirt, which turns out to explain everything about Talis that Jeremy has ever wondered about. It answers every single question that Jeremy has ever had about girls. And then Jeremy wakes up —

It's dark. Jeremy flips on the light. The dream is moving away from him. There was something about Mars. Elizabeth was asking who he thought was prettier, Talis or Elizabeth. They were laughing. They both had pointy fox ears. They wanted him to do something. There was a telephone number he was supposed to call. There was something he was supposed to do.

In two weeks, on the fifteenth of April, Jeremy and his mother will get in her van and start driving out to Las Vegas. Every morning before school, Jeremy takes long showers and his father doesn't say anything at all. One day it's as if nothing is wrong between his parents. The next day they won't even look at each other. Jeremy's father won't come out of his study. And then the day after that, Jeremy comes home and finds his mother sitting on his father's lap. They're smiling as if they know something stupid and secret. They don't even notice Jeremy when he walks through the room. Even this is preferable, though, to the way they behave when they do notice him. They act guilty and strange and as if they are about to ruin his life. Gordon Mars makes pancakes every morning, and Jeremy's favorite dinner, macaroni and cheese, every night. Jeremy's mother plans out an itinerary for their trip. They will be stopping at libraries across the country, because his mother loves libraries. But she's also bought a new two-man tent and two sleeping bags and a portable stove, so that they can camp, if Jeremy wants to camp. Even though Jeremy's mother hates the outdoors.

Right after she does this, Gordon Mars spends all weekend in the garage. He won't let either of them see what he's doing, and when he does

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

let them in, it turns out that he's removed the seating in the back of the van and bolted down two of his couches, one on each side, both upholstered in electric-blue fake fur.

They have to climb in through the cargo door at the back because one of the couches is blocking the sliding door. Jeremy's father says, looking very pleased with himself, "So now you don't have to camp outside, unless you want to. You can sleep inside. There's space underneath for suitcases. The sofas even have seat belts."

Over the sofas, Jeremy's father has rigged up small wooden shelves that fold down on chains from the walls of the van and become table tops. There's a travel-sized disco ball dangling from the ceiling, and a wooden panel — with Velcro straps and a black, quilted pad — behind the driver's seat, where Jeremy's father explains they can hang up the painting of the woman with the apple and the knife.

The van looks like something out of an episode of *The Library*. Jeremy's mother bursts into tears. She runs back inside the house. Jeremy's father says, helplessly, "I just wanted to make her laugh."

Jeremy wants to say, "I hate both of you." But he doesn't say it, and he doesn't. It would be easier if he did.

❦

When Jeremy told Karl about Las Vegas, Karl punched him in the stomach. Then he said, "Have you told Talis?"

Jeremy said, "You're supposed to be nice to me! You're supposed to tell me not to go and that this sucks and you're not supposed to punch me. Why did you punch me? Is Talis all you ever think about?"

"Kind of," Karl said. "Most of the time. Sorry, Germ, of course I wish you weren't going and yeah, it also pisses me off. We're supposed to be best friends, but you do stuff all the time and I never get to. I've never driven across the country or been to Las Vegas, even though I'd really, really like to. I can't feel sorry for you when I bet you anything that while you're there, you'll sneak into some casino and play slot machines and win like a million bucks. You should feel sorry for me. I'm the one that has to stay here. Can I borrow your dirt bike while you're gone?"

"Sure," Jeremy said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How about your telescope?" Karl said.

"I'm taking it with me," Jeremy said.

"Fine. You have to call me every day," Karl said. "You have to e-mail. You have to tell me about Las Vegas show girls. I want to know how tall they really are. Whose phone number is this?"

Karl was holding the scrap of paper with the number of Jeremy's phone booth.

"Mine," Jeremy said. "That's my phone booth. The one I inherited."

"Have you called it?" Karl said.

"No," Jeremy said. He'd called the phone booth a few times. But it wasn't a game. Karl would think it was a game.

"Cool," Karl said and he went ahead and dialed the number. "Hello?" Karl said, "I'd like to speak to the person in charge of Jeremy's life. This is Jeremy's best friend Karl."

"Not funny," Jeremy said.

"My life is boring," Karl said, into the phone. "I've never inherited anything. This girl I like won't talk to me. So is someone there? Does anybody want to talk to me? Does anyone want to talk to my friend, the Lord of the Phone Booth? Jeremy, they're demanding that you liberate the phone booth from yourself."

"Still not funny," Jeremy said and Karl hung up the phone.

Jeremy told Elizabeth. They were up on the roof of Jeremy's house and he told her the whole thing. Not just the part about Las Vegas, but also the part about his father and how he put Jeremy in a book with no giant spiders in it.

"Have you read it?" Elizabeth said.

"No," Jeremy said. "He won't let me. Don't tell Karl. All I told him is that my mom and I have to go out for a few months to check out the wedding chapel."

"I won't tell Karl," Elizabeth said. She leaned forward and kissed Jeremy and then she wasn't kissing him. It was all very fast and surprising, but they didn't fall off the roof. Nobody falls off the roof in this story. "Talis likes you," Elizabeth said. "That's what Amy says. Maybe you like her back. I don't know. But I thought I should go ahead and kiss you now. Just in case I don't get to kiss you again."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You can kiss me again," Jeremy said. "Talis probably doesn't like me."

"No," Elizabeth said. "I mean, let's not. I want to stay friends and it's hard enough to be friends, Germ. Look at you and Karl."

"I would never kiss Karl," Jeremy said.

"Funny, Germ. We should have a surprise party for you before you go," Elizabeth said.

"It won't be a surprise party now," Jeremy said. Maybe kissing him once was enough.

"Well, once I tell Amy it can't really be a surprise party," Elizabeth said. "She would explode into a million pieces and all the little pieces would start yelling, 'Guess what? Guess what? We're having a surprise party for you, Jeremy!' But just because I'm letting you in on the surprise doesn't mean there won't be surprises."

"I don't actually like surprises," Jeremy said.

"Who does?" Elizabeth said. "Only the people who do the surprising. Can we have the party at your house? I think it should be like Halloween, and it always feels like Halloween here. We could all show up in costumes and watch lots of old episodes of *The Library* and eat ice cream."

"Sure," Jeremy said. And then: "This is terrible! What if there's a new episode of *The Library* while I'm gone? Who am I going to watch it with?"

And he'd said the perfect thing. Elizabeth felt so bad about Jeremy having to watch *The Library* all by himself that she kissed him again.

THERE HAS NEVER been a giant spider in any episode of *The Library*, although once Fox got really small and Ptolemy Krill carried her around in his pocket. She had to rip up one of Krill's handkerchiefs and blindfold herself, just in case she accidentally read a draft of Krill's terrible poetry. And then it turned out that, as well as the poetry, Krill had also stashed a rare, horned Anubis earwig in his pocket which hadn't been properly preserved. Ptolemy Krill, it turned out, was careless with his kill jar. The earwig almost ate Fox, but instead it became her friend. It still sends her Christmas cards.

These are the two most important things that Jeremy and his friends have in common: a geographical location, and love of a television show

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about a library. Jeremy turns on the television as soon as he comes home from school. He flips through the channels, watching reruns of *Star Trek* and *Law & Order*. If there's a new episode of *The Library* before he and his mother leave for Las Vegas, then everything will be fine. Everything will work out. His mother says, "You watch too much television, Jeremy." But he goes on flipping through channels. Then he goes up to his room and makes phone calls.

"The new episode needs to be soon, because we're getting ready to leave. Tonight would be good. You'd tell me if there was going to be a new episode tonight, right?"

Silence.

"Can I take that as a yes? It would be easier if I had a brother," Jeremy tells his telephone booth. "Hello? Are you there? Or a sister. I'm tired of being good all the time. If I had a sibling, then we could take turns being good. If I had an older brother, I might be better at being bad, better at being angry. Karl is really good at being angry. He learned how from his brothers. I wouldn't want brothers like Karl's brothers, of course, but it sucks having to figure out everything all by myself. And the more normal I try to be, the more my parents think that I'm acting out. They think it's a phase that I'll grow out of. They think it isn't normal to be normal. Because there's no such thing as normal.

"And this whole book thing. The whole shoplifting thing, how my dad steals things, it figures that he went and stole my life. It isn't just me being melodramatic, to say that. That's exactly what he did! Did I tell you that once he stole a ferret from a pet store because he felt bad for it, and then he let it loose in our house and it turned out that it was pregnant? There was this woman who came to interview Dad and she sat down on one of the — "

Someone knocks on his bedroom door. "Jeremy," his mother says. "Is Karl here? Am I interrupting?"

"No," Jeremy says, and hangs up the phone. He's gotten into the habit of calling his phone booth every day. When he calls, it rings and rings and then it stops ringing, as if someone has picked up. There's just silence on the other end, no squeaky pretend-Fox voice, but it's a peaceful, interested silence. Jeremy complains about all the things there are to complain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about, and the silent person on the other end listens and listens. Maybe it is Fox standing there in his phone booth and listening patiently. He wonders what incarnation of Fox is listening. One thing about Fox: she's never sorry for herself. She's always too busy. If it were really Fox, she'd hang up on him.

Jeremy opens his door. "I was on the phone," he says. His mother comes in and sits down on his bed. She's wearing one of his father's old flannel shirts. "So have you packed?"

Jeremy shrugs. "I guess," he says. "Why did you cry when you saw what Dad did to the van? Don't you like it?"

"It's that damn painting," his mother says. "It was the first nice thing he ever gave me. We should have spent the money on health insurance and a new roof and groceries and instead he bought a painting. So I got angry. I left him. I took the painting and I moved into a hotel and I stayed there for a few days. I was going to sell the painting, but instead I fell in love with it, so I came home and apologized for running away. I got pregnant with you and I used to get hungry and dream that someone was going to give me a beautiful apple, like the one she's holding. When I told your father, he said he didn't trust her, that she was holding out the apple like that as a trick and if you went to take it from her, she'd stab you with the peeling knife. He says that she's a tough old broad and she'll take care of us while we're on the road."

"Do we really have to go?" Jeremy says. "If we go to Las Vegas I might get into trouble. I might start using drugs or gambling or something."

"Oh, Germ. You try so hard to be a good kid," his mother says. "You try so hard to be normal. Sometimes I'd like to be normal, too. Maybe Vegas will be good for us. Are these the books that you're bringing?"

Jeremy shrugs. "Not all of them. I can't decide which ones I should take and which ones I can leave. It feels like whatever I leave behind, I'm leaving behind for good."

"That's silly," his mother says. "We're coming back. I promise. Your father and I will work things out. If you leave something behind that you need, he can mail it to you. Do you think there are slot machines in the libraries in Las Vegas? I talked to a woman at the Hell's Bells chapel and there's something called The Arts and Lovecraft Library where they keep Cleo's special collection of horror novels and gothic romances and fake

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

copies of *The Necronomicon.* You go in and out through a secret, swinging-bookcase door. People get married in it. There's a Dr. Frankenstein's LoveLab, the Masque of the Red Death Ballroom, and also something just called The Crypt. Oh yeah, and there's also The Vampire's Patio and The Black Lagoon Grotto, where you can get married by moonlight."

"You hate all this stuff," Jeremy says.

"It's not my cup of tea," his mother says. "When does everyone show up tonight?"

"Around eight," Jeremy says. "Are you going to get dressed up?"

"I don't have to dress up," his mother says. "I'm a librarian, remember?"

❦

Jeremy's father's office is above the garage. In theory, no one is meant to interrupt him while he's working, but in practice Jeremy's father loves nothing better than to be interrupted, as long as the person who interrupts brings him something to eat. When Jeremy and his mother are gone, who will bring Jeremy's father food? Jeremy hardens his heart.

The floor is covered with books and bolts and samples of upholstering fabrics. Jeremy's father is lying facedown on the floor with his feet propped up on a bolt of fabric, which means that he is thinking and also that his back hurts. He claims to think best when he is on the verge of falling asleep.

"I brought you a bowl of Froot Loops," Jeremy says.

His father rolls over and looks up. "Thanks," he says. "What time is it? Is everyone here? Is that your costume? Is that my tuxedo jacket?"

"It's five-ish. Nobody's here yet. Do you like it?" Jeremy says. He's dressed as a Forbidden Book. His father's jacket is too big, but he still feels very elegant. Very sinister. His mother lent him the lipstick and the feathers and the platform heels.

"It's interesting," his father allows. "And a little frightening."

Jeremy feels obscurely pleased, even though he knows that his father is more amused than frightened. "Everyone else will probably come as Fox or Prince Wing. Except for Karl. He's coming as Ptolemy Krill. He even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wrote some really bad poetry. I wanted to ask you something, before we leave tomorrow."

"Shoot," his father says.

"Did you really get rid of the novel with me in it?"

"No," his father says. "It felt unlucky. Unlucky to keep it, unlucky not to keep it. I don't know what to do with it."

Jeremy says, "I'm glad you didn't get rid of it."

"It's not any good, you know," his father says. "Which makes all this even worse. At first it was because I was bored with giant spiders. It was going to be something funny to show you. But then I wrote that you had a brain tumor and it wasn't funny anymore. I figured I could save you — I'm the author, after all — but you got sicker and sicker. You were going through a rebellious phase. You were sneaking out of the house a lot and you hit your mother. You were a real jerk. But it turned out you had a brain tumor and that was making you behave strangely."

"Can I ask another question?" Jeremy says. "You know how you like to steal things? You know how you're really, really good at it?"

"Yeah," says his father.

"Could you not steal things for a while, if I asked you to?" Jeremy says. "Mom isn't going to be around to pay for the books and stuff that you steal. I don't want you to end up in jail because we went to Las Vegas."

His father closes his eyes as if he hopes Jeremy will forget that he asked a question, and go away.

Jeremy says nothing.

"All right," his father says finally. "I won't shoplift anything until you get home again."

Jeremy's mother runs around taking photos of everyone. Talis and Elizabeth have both showed up as Fox, although Talis is dead Fox. She carries her fake fur ears and tail around in a little see-through plastic purse and she also has a sword, which she leaves in the umbrella stand in the kitchen. Jeremy and Talis haven't talked much since she had a dream about him and since he told her that he's going to Las Vegas. She didn't say anything about that. Which is perfectly normal for Talis.

Karl makes an excellent Ptolemy Krill. Jeremy's Forbidden Book disguise is admired.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Amy's Faithful Margaret costume is almost as good as anything Faithful Margaret wears on TV. There are even special effects: Amy has rigged up her hair with red ribbons and wire and spray color and egg whites so that it looks as if it's on fire, and there are tiny papier-mâché golems in it, making horrible faces. She dances a polka with Jeremy's father. Faithful Margaret is mad for polka dancing.

No one has dressed up as Prince Wing.

They watch the episode with the possessed chicken and they watch the episode with the Salt Wife and they watch the episode where Prince Wing and Faithful Margaret fall under a spell and swap bodies and have sex for the first time. They watch the episode where Fox saves Prince Wing's life for the first time.

Jeremy's father makes chocolate/mango/espresso milk shakes for everyone. None of Jeremy's friends, except for Elizabeth, know about the novel. Everyone thinks Jeremy and his mother are just having an adventure. Everyone thinks Jeremy will be back at the end of the summer.

"I wonder how they find the actors," Elizabeth says. "They aren't real actors. They must be regular people. But you'd think that somewhere there would be someone who knows them. That somebody online would say, hey, that's my sister! Or that's the kid I went to school with who threw up in P.E. You know, sometimes someone says something like that or sometimes someone pretends that they know something about *The Library*, but it always turns out to be a hoax. Just somebody wanting to be somebody."

"What about the guy who's writing it?" Karl says.

Talis says, "Who says it's a guy?" and Amy says, "Yeah, Karl, why do you always assume it's a guy writing it?"

"Maybe nobody's writing it," Elizabeth says. "Maybe it's magic or it's broadcast from outer space. Maybe it's real. Wouldn't that be cool?"

"No," Jeremy says. "Because then Fox would really be dead. That would suck."

"I don't care," Elizabeth says. "I wish it were real, anyway. Maybe it all really happened somewhere, like King Arthur or Robin Hood, and this is just one version of how it happened. Like a magical After School Special."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Even if it isn't real," Amy says, "parts of it could be real. Like maybe the World-Tree Library is real. Or maybe *The Library* is made up, but Fox is based on somebody that the writer knew. Writers do that all the time, right? Jeremy, I think your dad should write a book about me. I could be eaten by giant spiders. Or have sex with giant spiders and have spider babies. I think that would be so great."

So Amy does have psychic abilities, after all, although hopefully she will never know this. When Jeremy tests his own potential psychic abilities, he can almost sense his father, hovering somewhere just outside the living room, listening to this conversation and maybe even taking notes. Which is what writers do. But Jeremy isn't really psychic. It's just that lurking and hovering and appearing suddenly when you weren't expecting him are what his father does, just like shoplifting and cooking. Jeremy prays to all the dark gods that he never receives the gift of knowing what people are thinking. It's a dark road and it ends up with you trapped on late night television in front of an invisible audience of depressed insomniacs wearing hats made out of tinfoil and they all want to pay you nine-ninety-nine per minute to hear you describe in minute, terrible detail what their deceased cat is thinking about, right now. What kind of future is that? He wants to go to Mars. And when will Elizabeth kiss him again? You can't just kiss someone twice and then never kiss them again. He tries not to think about Elizabeth and kissing, just in case Amy reads his mind. He realizes that he's been staring at Talis's breasts, glares instead at Elizabeth, who is watching TV. Meanwhile, Karl is glaring at him.

On television, Fox is dancing in the Invisible Nightclub with Faithful Margaret, whose hair is about to catch fire again. The Norns are playing their screechy cover of "Come On, Eileen." The Norns only know two songs: "Come On, Eileen," and "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." They don't play real instruments. They play squeaky dog toys and also a bathtub, which is enchanted, although nobody knows who by, or why, or what it was enchanted for.

"If you had to chose one," Jeremy says, "invisibility or the ability to fly, which would you choose?"

Everybody looks at him. "Only perverts would want to be invisible," Elizabeth says.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You'd have to be naked if you were invisible," Karl says. "Because otherwise people would see your clothes."

"If you could fly, you'd have to wear thermal underwear because it's cold up there. So it just depends on whether you like to wear long underwear or no underwear at all," Amy says.

It's the kind of conversation that they have all the time. It makes Jeremy feel homesick even though he hasn't left yet.

"Maybe I'll go make brownies," Jeremy says. "Elizabeth, do you want to help me make brownies?"

"Shhh," Elizabeth says. "This is a good part."

On television, Fox and Faithful Margaret are making out. The Faithful part is kind of a joke.

JEREMY'S PARENTS go to bed at one. By three, Amy and Elizabeth are passed out on the couch and Karl has gone upstairs to check his e-mail on Jeremy's iBook. On TV, wolves are roaming the tundra of The Free People's World-Tree Library's fortieth floor. Snow is falling heavily and librarians are burning books to keep warm, but only the most dull and improving works of literature.

Jeremy isn't sure where Talis has gone, so he goes to look for her. She hasn't gone far. She's on the landing, looking at the space on the wall where Alice Mars's painting should be hanging. Talis is carrying her sword with her, and her little plastic purse. In the bathroom off the landing, the singing toilet is still singing away in German. "We're taking the painting with us," Jeremy says. "My dad insisted, just in case he accidentally burns down the house while we're gone. Do you want to go see it? I was going to show everybody, but everybody's asleep right now."

"Sure," Talis says.

So Jeremy gets a flashlight and takes her out to the garage and shows her the van. She climbs right inside and sits down on one of the blue-fur couches. She looks around and he wonders what she's thinking. He wonders if the toilet song is stuck in her head.

"My dad did all of this," Jeremy says. He turns on the flashlight and shines it on the disco ball. Light spatters off in anxious, slippery orbits. Jeremy shows Talis how his father has hung up the painting. It looks truly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wrong in the van, as if someone demented put it there. Especially with the light reflecting off the disco ball. The woman in the painting looks confused and embarrassed as if Jeremy's father has accidentally canceled out her protective powers. Maybe the disco ball is her Kryptonite.

"So remember how you had a dream about me?" Jeremy says. Talis nods. "I think I had a dream about you, that you were Fox."

Talis opens up her arms, encompassing her costume, her sword, her plastic purse with poor Fox's ears and tail inside.

"There was something you wanted me to do," Jeremy says. "I was supposed to save you, somehow."

Talis just looks at him.

"How come you never talk?" Jeremy says. All of this is irritating. How he used to feel normal around Elizabeth, like friends, and now everything is peculiar and uncomfortable. How he used to enjoy feeling uncomfortable around Talis, and now, suddenly, he doesn't. This must be what sex is about. Stop thinking about sex, he thinks.

Talis opens her mouth and closes it again. Then she says, "I don't know. Amy talks so much. You all talk a lot. Somebody has to be the person who doesn't. The person who listens."

"Oh," Jeremy says. "I thought maybe you had a tragic secret. Like maybe you used to stutter." Except secrets can't have secrets, they just *are*.

"Nope," Talis says. "It's like being invisible, you know. Not talking. I like it."

"But you're not invisible," Jeremy says. "Not to me. Not to Karl. Karl really likes you. Did you hit him with a boa constrictor on purpose?"

But Talis says, "I wish you weren't leaving." The disco ball spins and spins. It makes Jeremy feel kind of carsick and also as if he has sparkly, disco leprosy. He doesn't say anything back to Talis, just to see how it feels. Except maybe that's rude. Or maybe it's rude the way everybody always talks and doesn't leave any space for Talis to say anything.

"At least you get to miss school," Talis says, at last.

"Yeah," he says. He leaves another space, but Talis doesn't say anything this time. "We're going to stop at all these museums and things on the way across the country. I'm supposed to keep a blog for school and describe stuff in it. I'm going to make a lot of stuff up. So it will be like Creative Writing and not so much like homework."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You should make a list of all the towns with weird names you drive through," Talis says. "Town of Horseheads. That's a real place."

"Plantagenet," Jeremy says. "That's a real place too. I had something really weird to tell you."

Talis waits, like she always does.

Jeremy says, "I called my phone booth, the one that I inherited, and someone answered. She sounded just like Fox when she talked. They told me to call back later. So I've called a few more times, but I don't ever get her."

"Fox isn't a real person," Talis says. "*The Library* is just TV." But she sounds uncertain. That's the thing about *The Library*. Nobody knows for sure. Everyone who watches it wishes and hopes that it's not just acting. That it's magic, real magic.

"I know," Jeremy says.

"I wish Fox was real," Fox-Talis says.

They've been sitting in the van for a long time. If Karl looks for them and can't find them, he's going to think that they've been making out. He'll kill Jeremy. Once Karl tried to strangle another kid for accidentally peeing on his shoes. Jeremy might as well kiss Talis. So he does, even though she's still holding her sword. She doesn't hit him with it. It's dark and he has his eyes closed and he can almost imagine that he's kissing Elizabeth.

Karl has fallen asleep on Jeremy's bed. Talis is downstairs, fast-forwarding through the episode where some librarians drink too much Euphoria and decide to abolish Story Hour. Not just the practice of having a Story Hour, but the whole Hour. Amy and Elizabeth are still sacked out on the couch. It's weird to watch Amy sleep. She doesn't talk in her sleep.

Karl is snoring. Jeremy could go up on the roof and look at stars, except he's already packed up his telescope. He could try to wake up Elizabeth and they could go up on the roof, but Talis is down there. He and Talis could go sit on the roof, but he doesn't want to kiss Talis on the roof. He makes a solemn oath to only ever kiss Elizabeth on the roof.

He picks up his phone. Maybe he can call his phone booth and complain just a little and not wake Karl up. His dad is going to freak out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about the phone bill. All these calls to Nevada. It's 4 A.M. Jeremy's plan is not to go to sleep at all. His friends are lame.

The phone rings and rings and rings and then someone picks up. Jeremy recognizes the silence on the other end. "Everybody came over and fell asleep," he whispers. "That's why I'm whispering. I don't even think they care that I'm leaving. And my feet hurt. Remember how I was going to dress up as a Forbidden Book? Platform shoes aren't comfortable. Karl thinks I did it on purpose, to be even taller than him than usual. And I forgot that I was wearing lipstick and I kissed Talis and got lipstick all over her face, so it's a good thing everyone was asleep because otherwise someone would have seen. And my dad says that he won't shoplift at all while Mom and I are gone, but you can't trust him. And that fake-fur upholstery sheds like — "

"Jeremy," that strangely familiar, sweet-and-rusty door-hinge voice says softly. "Shut up, Jeremy. I need your help."

"Wow!" Jeremy says, not in a whisper. "Wow, wow, wow! Is this Fox? Are you really Fox? Is this a joke? Are you real? Are you dead? What are you doing in my phone booth?"

"You know who I am," Fox says, and Jeremy knows with all his heart that it's really Fox. "I need you to do something for me."

"What?" Jeremy says. Karl, on the bed, laughs in his sleep as if the idea of Jeremy doing something is funny to him. "What could I do?"

"I need you to steal three books," Fox says. "From a library in a place called Iowa."

"I know Iowa," Jeremy says. "I mean, I've never been there, but it's a real place. I could go there."

"I'm going to tell you the books you need to steal," Fox says. "Author, title, and the jewelly festival number — "

"Dewey Decimal," Jeremy says. "It's actually called the Dewey Decimal number in real libraries."

"Real," Fox says, sounding amused. "You need to write this all down and also how to get to the library. You need to steal the three books and bring them to me. It's very important."

"Is it dangerous?" Jeremy says. "Are the Forbidden Books up to something? Are the Forbidden Books real, too? What if I get caught stealing?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's not dangerous to you," Fox says. "Just don't get caught. Remember the episode of *The Library* when I was the little old lady with the beehive and I stole the Bishop of Tweedle's false teeth while he was reading the banns for the wedding of Faithful Margaret and Sir Petronella the Younger? Remember how he didn't even notice?"

"I've never seen that episode," Jeremy says, although as far as he knows he's never missed a single episode of *The Library*. He's never even heard of Sir Petronella.

"Oh," Fox says. "Maybe that's a flashback in a later episode or something. That's a great episode. We're depending on you, Jeremy. You have got to steal these books. They contain dreadful secrets. I can't say the titles out loud. I'm going to spell them instead."

So Jeremy gets a pad of paper and Fox spells out the titles of each book twice. (They aren't titles that can be written down here. It's safer not to even think about some books.) "Can I ask you something?" Jeremy says. "Can I tell anybody about this? Not Amy. But could I tell Karl or Elizabeth? Or Talis? Can I tell my mom? If I woke up Karl right now, would you talk to him for a minute?"

"I don't have a lot of time," Fox says. "I have to go now. Please don't tell anyone, Jeremy. I'm sorry."

"Is it the Forbidden Books?" Jeremy says again. What would Fox think if she saw the costume he's still wearing, all except for the platform heels? "Do you think I shouldn't trust my friends? But I've known them my whole life!"

Fox makes a noise, a kind of pained whuff.

"What is it?" Jeremy says. "Are you okay?"

"I have to go," Fox says. "Nobody can know about this. Don't give anybody this number. Don't tell anyone about your phone booth. Or me. Promise, Germ?"

"Only if you promise you won't call me Germ," Jeremy says, feeling really stupid. "I hate when people call me that. Call me Mars instead."

"Mars," Fox says, and it sounds exotic and strange and brave, as if Jeremy has just become a new person, a person named after a whole planet, a person who kisses girls and talks to Foxes.

"I've never stolen anything," Jeremy says.

But Fox has hung up.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Maybe out there, somewhere, is someone who enjoys having to say good-bye, but it isn't anyone that Jeremy knows. All of his friends are grumpy and red-eyed, although not from crying. From lack of sleep. From too much television. There are still faint red stains around Talis's mouth and if everyone weren't so tired, they would realize it's Jeremy's lipstick. Karl gives Jeremy a handful of quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies. "For the slot machines," Karl says. "If you win anything, you can keep a third of what you win."

"Half," Jeremy says, automatically.

"Fine," Karl says. "It's all from your dad's sofas, anyway. Just one more thing. Stop getting taller. Don't get taller while you're gone. Okay." He hugs Jeremy hard: so hard that it's almost like getting punched again. No wonder Talis threw the boa constrictor at Karl.

Talis and Elizabeth both hug Jeremy good-bye. Talis looks even more mysterious now that he's sat with her under a disco ball and made out. Later on, Jeremy will discover that Talis has left her sword under the blue fur couch and he'll wonder if she left it on purpose.

Talis doesn't say anything and Amy, of course, doesn't shut up, not even when she kisses him. It feels weird to be kissed by someone who goes right on talking while they kiss you and yet it shouldn't be a surprise that Amy kisses him. He imagines that later Amy and Talis and Elizabeth will all compare notes.

Elizabeth says, "I promise I'll tape every episode of *The Library* while you're gone so we can all watch them together when you get back. I promise I'll call you in Vegas, no matter what time it is there, when there's a new episode."

Her hair is a mess and her breath is faintly sour. Jeremy wishes he could tell her how beautiful she looks. "I'll write bad poetry and send it to you," he says.

Jeremy's mother is looking hideously cheerful as she goes in and out of the house, making sure that she hasn't left anything behind. She loves long car trips. It doesn't bother her one bit that she and her son are abandoning their entire lives. She passes Jeremy a folder full of maps. "You're in charge of not getting lost," she says. "Put these somewhere safe."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeremy says, "I found a library online that I want to go visit. Out in Iowa. They have a corn mosaic on the façade of the building, with a lot of naked goddesses and gods dancing around in a field of corn. Someone wants to take it down. Can we go see it first?"

"Sure," his mother says.

Jeremy's father has filled a whole grocery bag with sandwiches. His hair is drooping and he looks even more like an axe murderer than usual. If this were a movie, you'd think that Jeremy and his mother were escaping in the nick of time. "You take care of your mother," he says to Jeremy.

"Sure," Jeremy says. "You take care of yourself."

His dad sags. "You take care of yourself, too." So it's settled. They're all supposed to take care of themselves. Why can't they stay home and take care of each other, until Jeremy is good and ready to go off to college? "I've got another bag of sandwiches in the kitchen," his dad says. "I should go get them."

"Wait," Jeremy says. "I have to ask you something before we take off. Suppose I had to steal something. I mean, I don't have to steal anything, of course, and I know stealing is wrong, even when *you* do it, and I would never steal anything. But what if I did? How do you do it? How do you do it and not get caught?"

His father shrugs. He's probably wondering if Jeremy is really his son. Gordon Mars inherited his mutant, long-fingered, ambidextrous hands from a long line of shoplifters and money launderers and petty criminals. They're all deeply ashamed of Jeremy's father. Gordon Mars had a gift and he threw it away to become a writer. "I don't know," he says. He picks up Jeremy's hand and looks at it as if he's never noticed before that Jeremy had something hanging off the end of his wrist. "You just do it. You do it like you're not really doing anything at all. You do it while you're thinking about something else and you forget that you're doing it."

"Oh, Jeremy says, taking his hand back. "I'm not planning on stealing anything. I was just curious."

His father looks at him. "Take care of yourself," he says again, as if he really means it, and hugs Jeremy hard.

Then he goes and gets the sandwiches (so many sandwiches that Jeremy and his mother will eat sandwiches for the first three days, and still have to throw half of them away). Everyone waves. Jeremy and his mother

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

climb in the van. Jeremy's mother turns on the CD player. Bob Dylan is singing about monkeys. His mother loves Bob Dylan. They drive away.

DO YOU KNOW how, sometimes, during a commercial break in your favorite television shows, your best friend calls and wants to talk about one of her boyfriends, and when you try to hang up, she starts crying and you try to cheer her up and end up missing about half of the episode? And so when you go to work the next day, you have to get the guy who sits next to you to explain what happened? That's the good thing about a book. You can mark your place in a book. But this isn't really a book. It's a television show.

In one episode of *The Library*, an adolescent boy drives across the country with his mother. They have to change a tire. The boy practices taking things out of his mother's purse and putting them back again. He steals a sixteen-ounce bottle of Coke from one convenience market and leaves it at another convenience market. The boy and his mother stop at a lot of libraries, and the boy keeps a blog, but he skips the bit about the library in Iowa. He writes in his blog about what he's reading, but he doesn't read the books he stole in Iowa, because Fox told him not to, and because he has to hide them from his mother. Well, he reads just a few pages. Skims, really. He hides them under the blue-fur sofa. They go camping in Utah, and the boy sets up his telescope. He sees three shooting stars and a coyote. He never sees anyone who looks like a Forbidden Book, although he sees a transvestite go into the woman's rest room at a rest stop in Indiana. He calls a phone booth just outside Las Vegas twice, but no one ever answers. He has short conversations with his father. He wonders what his father is up to. He wishes he could tell his father about Fox and the books. Once the boy's mother finds a giant spider the size of an Oreo in their tent. She starts laughing hysterically. She takes a picture of it with her digital camera, and the boy puts the picture on his blog. Sometimes the boy asks questions and his mother talks about her parents. Once she cries. The boy doesn't know what to say. They talk about their favorite episodes of *The Library* and the episodes that they really hated, and the mother asks if the boy thinks Fox is really dead. He says he doesn't think so.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Once a man tries to break into the van while they are sleeping in it. But then he goes away. Maybe the painting of the woman with the peeling knife is protecting them.

But you've seen this episode before.

It's Cinco de Mayo. It's almost seven o'clock at night, and the sun is beginning to go down. Jeremy and his mother are in the desert and Las Vegas is somewhere in front of them. Every time they pass a driver coming the other way, Jeremy tries to figure out if that person has just won or lost a lot of money. Everything is flat and sort of tilted here, except off in the distance, where the land goes up abruptly, as if someone has started to fold up a map. Somewhere around here is the Grand Canyon, which must have been a surprise when people first saw it.

Jeremy's mother says, "Are you sure we have to do this first? Couldn't we go find your phone booth later?"

"Can we do it now?" Jeremy says. "I said I was going to do it on my blog. It's like a quest that I have to complete."

"Okay," his mother says. "It should be around here somewhere. It's supposed to be four point five miles after the turnoff, and here's the turnoff."

It isn't hard to find the phone booth. There isn't much else around. Jeremy should feel excited when he sees it, but it's a disappointment, really. He's seen phone booths before. He was expecting something to be different. Mostly he just feels tired of road trips and tired of roads and just tired, tired, tired. He looks around to see if Fox is somewhere nearby, but there's just a hiker off in the distance. Some kid.

"Okay, Germ," his mother says. "Make this quick."

"I need to get my backpack out of the back," Jeremy says.

"Do you want me to come too?" his mother says.

"No," Jeremy says. "This is kind of personal."

His mother looks like she's trying not to laugh. "Just hurry up. I have to pee."

When Jeremy gets to the phone booth, he turns around. His mother has the light on in the van. It looks like she's singing along to the radio. His mother has a terrible voice.

When he steps inside the phone booth, it isn't magical. The phone booth smells rank, as if an animal has been living in it. The windows are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smudgy. He takes the stolen books out of his backpack and puts them in the little shelf where someone has stolen a phone book. Then he waits. Maybe Fox is going to call him. Maybe he's supposed to wait until she calls. But she doesn't call. He feels lonely. There's no one he can tell about this. He feels like an idiot and he also feels kind of proud. Because he did it. He drove cross-country with his mother and saved an imaginary person.

"So how's your phone booth?" his mother says.

"Great!" he says, and they're both silent again. Las Vegas is in front of them and then all around them and everything is lit up like they're inside a pinball game. All of the trees look fake. Like someone read too much Dr. Seuss and got ideas. People are walking up and down the sidewalks. Some of them look normal. Others look like they just escaped from a fancy-dress ball at a lunatic asylum. Jeremy hopes they've just won lots of money and that's why they look so startled, so strange. Or maybe they're all vampires.

"Left," he tells his mother. "Go left here. Look out for the vampires on the crosswalk. And then it's an immediate right." Four times his mother let him drive the van: once in Utah, twice in South Dakota, once in Pennsylvania. The van smells like old burger wrappers and fake fur, and it doesn't help that Jeremy's gotten used to the smell. The woman in the painting has had a pained expression on her face for the last few nights, and the disco ball has lost some of its pieces of mirror because Jeremy kept knocking his head on it in the morning. Jeremy and his mother haven't showered in three days.

Here is the wedding chapel, in front of them, at the end of a long driveway. Electric purple light shines on a sign that spells out HELL'S BELLS. There's a wrought-iron fence and a yard full of trees dripping Spanish moss. Under the trees, tombstones and miniature mausoleums.

"Do you think those are real?" his mother says. She sounds slightly worried.

"'Harry East, Recently Deceased,'" Jeremy says. "No, I don't."

There's a hearse in the driveway with a little plaque on the back. RECENTLY ~~BURIED~~ MARRIED. The chapel is a Victorian house with a bell tower. Perhaps it's full of bats. Or giant spiders. Jeremy's father would love this place. His mother is going to hate it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Someone stands at the threshold of the chapel, door open, looking out at them. But as Jeremy and his mother get out of the van, he turns and goes inside and shuts the door. "Look out," his mother says. "They've probably gone to put the boiling oil in the microwave."

She rings the doorbell determinedly. Instead of ringing, there's a recording of a crow. *Caw, caw, caw.* All the lights in the Victorian house go out. Then they turn on again. The door swings open and Jeremy tightens his grip on his backpack, just in case. "Good evening, Madam. Young man," a man says and Jeremy looks up and up and up. The man at the door has to lower his head to look out. His hands are large as toaster ovens. He looks like he's wearing Chihuahua coffins on his feet. Two realistic-looking bolts stick out on either side of his head. He wears green pancake makeup, glittery green eye shadow, and his lashes are as long and thick and green as AstroTurf. "We weren't expecting you so soon."

"We should have called ahead," Jeremy's mother says. "I'm real sorry."

"Great costume," Jeremy says.

The Frankenstein curls his lip in a somber way. "Thank you," he says. "Call me Miss Thing, please."

"I'm Jeremy," Jeremy says. "This is my mother."

"Oh please," Miss Thing says. Even his wink is somber. "You tease me. She isn't old enough to be your mother."

"Oh please, yourself," Jeremy's mother says.

"Quick, the two of you," someone yells from somewhere inside Hell's Bells. "While you zthtand there gabbing, the devil ithz prowling around like a lion, looking for a way to get in. Are you juthzt going to zthtand there and hold the door wide open for him?"

So they all step inside. "Is that Jeremy Marthz at lathzt?" the voice says. "Earth to Marthz, Earth to Marthz. Marthzzz, Jeremy Marthzzz, there'thz zthomeone on the phone for Jeremy Marthz. She'thz called three timethz in the lathzt ten minutethz, Jeremy Marthzzzz."

It's Fox, Jeremy knows. Of course, it's Fox! She's in the phone booth. She's got the books and she's going to tell me that I saved whatever it is that I was saving. He walks toward the buzzing voice while Miss Thing and his mother go back out to the van.

He walks past a room full of artfully draped spider webs and candelabras

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drooping with drippy candles. Someone is playing the organ behind a wooden screen. He goes down the hall and up a long staircase. The banisters are carved with little faces. Owls and foxes and ugly children. The voice goes on talking. "Yoohoo, Jeremy, up the stairthz, that'thz right. Now, come along, come right in! Not in there, in here, in here! Don't mind the dark, we *like* the dark, just watch your step." Jeremy puts his hand out. He touches something and there's a click and the bookcase in front of him slowly slides back. Now the room is three times as large and there are more bookshelves and there's a young woman wearing dark sunglasses, sitting on a couch. She has a megaphone in one hand and a phone in the other. "For you, Jeremy Marth," she says. She's the palest person Jeremy has ever seen and her two canine teeth are so pointed that she lisps a little when she talks. On the megaphone the lisp was sinister, but now it just makes her sound irritable.

She hands him the phone. "Hello?" he says. He keeps an eye on the vampire.

"Jeremy!" Elizabeth says. "It's on, it's on, it's on! It's just started! We're all just sitting here. Everybody's here. What happened to your cell phone? We kept calling."

"Mom left it in the visitor's center at Zion," Jeremy says.

"Well, you're there. We figured out from your blog that you must be near Vegas. Amy says she had a feeling that you were going to get there in time. She made us keep calling. Stay on the phone, Jeremy. We can all watch it together, okay? Hold on."

Karl grabs the phone. "Hey, Germ, I didn't get any postcards," he says. "You forget how to write or something? Wait a minute. Somebody wants to say something to you." Then he laughs and laughs and passes the phone on to someone else who doesn't say anything at all.

"Talis?" Jeremy says.

Maybe it isn't Talis. Maybe it's Elizabeth again. He thinks about how his mouth is right next to Elizabeth's ear. Or maybe it's Talis's ear.

The vampire on the couch is already flipping through the channels. Jeremy would like to grab the remote away from her, but it's not a good idea to try to take things away from a vampire. His mother and Miss Thing come up the stairs and into the room and suddenly the room seems absolutely full of people, as if Karl and Amy and Elizabeth and Talis have

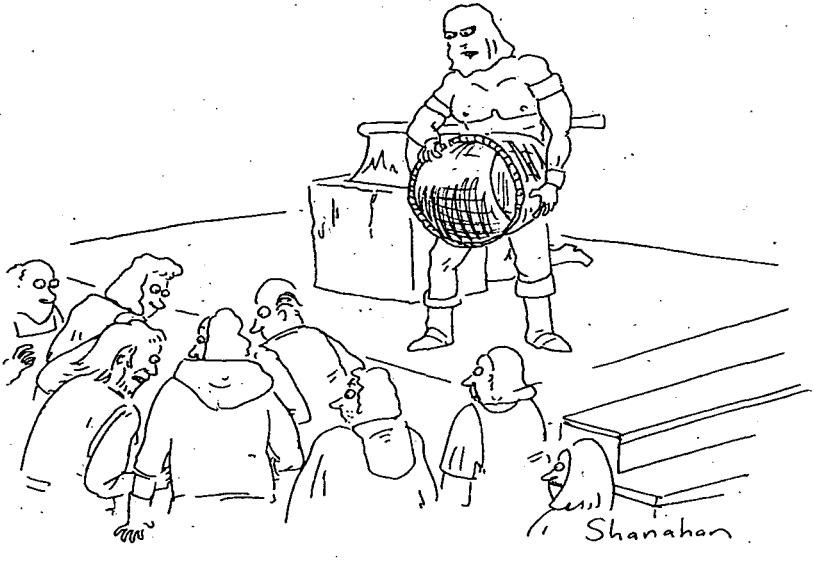
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

come into the room, too. His hand is getting sweaty around the phone. Miss Thing is holding Jeremy's mother's painting firmly, as if it might try to escape. Jeremy's mother looks tired. For the past three days her hair has been braided into two long fat pigtails. She looks younger to Jeremy, as if they've been traveling backward in time instead of just across the country. She smiles at Jeremy, a giddy, exhausted smile. Jeremy smiles back.

"Is it *The Library*?" Miss Thing says. "Is a new episode on?"

Jeremy sits down on the couch beside the vampire, still holding the phone to his ear. His arm is getting tired.

"I'm here," he says to Talis or Elizabeth or whoever it is on the other end of the phone. "I'm here." And then he sits and doesn't say anything and waits with everyone else for the vampire to find the right channel so they can all find out if he's saved Fox, if Fox is alive, if Fox is still alive.



"A little help!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Soul Mining

"Rex Miller taught me more about the creative process than any writer I have ever known. Working with him, I came to understand that creativity is a black and terror-filled realm into which the artist plunges, loads his bucket with howling madness, and hauls it to the surface where he then, somehow, must shape it in the cool light of rationality.... [T]he challenge of taming this material for publication must have been like training a dragon to prance on a leash like a toy poodle."

—Richard Curtis, eulogy for Rex Miller, *Chronicle*, September 2004.

I GRABBED my lunch pail, my soul bucket, and my hard hat and headed for the door of the humble, drafty, company-owned shack where my family and I lived. I had intended to slip quietly away, while my wife and children were still sleeping, but their love and concern for me brought them instinctively awake before I could get out the door.

Clematis, my beautiful wife, had never looked more alluring than she did this morning. But the fear that she fought to control lent her features a twisted cast.

"Rex, dearest, must you really return to the story mines so soon? After all, you've barely recovered from that incident with the wild metaphor."

I flexed my formerly dislocated shoulder and winced. Although I didn't have my full range of motion restored, I felt much better and was convinced I could handle any combative story elements that I might encounter today. More to the point, I could hardly afford another week out of work. Amalgamated Fiction Mining was hardly going to extend us credit on our rent or at the company store. If I didn't earn some royalties soon, I and my family would be out in the streets.

"That incident was all my own

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fault, Clem. I never should've tried fastening that dog collar on a dragon in the first place, never mind taking it for a walk on a leash. But you can rest easily, for I'm only working the Limerick Face today. The money's not great, of course, but I thought I'd take it slow at first — "

Clematis clapped her hands together and grinned.

"Oh, Rex, I'm so relieved! The worst that can happen to you there is for your distich to get enjambed!"

The twins — Ricardo and Ricardina — had been watching wide-eyed and tremulous while their mother and I talked. But now that everything seemed fine, they broke into shouts and happy farewells.

"We'll miss you, Daddy!"

"Come back safe!"

"Will you bring me a synecdoche! Pretty please!"

"I want a periphrasis! Just a little one! Please?"

I tousled their heads and said, "We'll see. I can't make any guarantees."

The children looked so crestfallen at my refusal to promise them a few castoffs from the pit that I relented instantly.

"Oh, all right, maybe just a little parable. But you have to share it!"

"We will, Daddy, we promise!"

Feeling much better, I left my cottage behind.

It was a short walk through the lanes of identical cottages to the minehead. Along the way, I picked up my companions in the soul-mining trade, grim, work-worn men and women all clad alike in soiled coveralls, carrying their clanking soul buckets on the way to another day down the narrative shaft.

Eventually, having become part of a crowd of over fifty workers, I arrived at the elevator that would carry us downward into the depths of the psychical earth, deep into the fossilized subconscious, where we would hack at the uncooperative substance of our dreams, hoping to release at least a small soul spurt that would fill our buckets for later manipulation back on the surface, in the cool light of rationality.

The rattletrap rusted wire cage of the elevator would hold only ten people at a time. I managed to crowd forward into the first batch of miners.

I found myself among a host of familiar faces, most of them bearing scars.

Bill Collard, who still limped from a broken leg received in a subplot cave-in last year.

Susy Granville, who had lost

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

three fingers on her left hand to a raging sonnet.

Ilona Rhinebeck, who sported an eye-patch, thanks to a confused denouement.

Wembley Kingman, whose hair had turned entirely white when confronted with an out-of-control trilogy.

The only one among us who didn't exhibit the marks of long labor at the narrative interface was young Gifford Goodenow, who had joined us only last month.

Now Gifford piped up in his naïve way.

"Boy, have I got a swell feeling about today's shift. I think I might even discover a new subgenre!"

Bill Collard snorted through his walrus mustache. "Pshaw! Last time thet happened was nigh on twenty years ago, when thet there lanky feller hit upon the cyberpunk lode. Retired right after, lor' bless 'im!"

We all contemplated making such a rich strike as the elevator rattled downward.

When the cage reached the bottom and we piled out, we found our shift boss awaiting us. Amid the claustrophobia-inducing shadows and chthonic heat and flickering low-watt electric lights, Hank Huntsman presented a reassuring albeit admonishing sight. A grizzled old coot who had once been the deftest hand at shaping soul spurts into rip-roaring tales that Amalgamated Fiction Mining had ever employed, nowadays Huntsman, after the ravages that wrestling with the monsters of the id had inflicted on his mind and body, was fit only to supervise us. Nonetheless, his vast experience served to make our harsh lives a little safer.

"Collard," called out Huntsman, "you're working the Romance Vein today. Granville, you're in Metafictions. Miller, you signed up for Limericks. The rest of you head over to Legal Thrillers. Got a big call for them, we do."

We split up as dictated. Already the cage to the surface was heading up for another pod of soul-miners.

I found myself alone at the Limerick Face, which was just as I liked it. Collaborating was never my strong suit. I grabbed one of the picks left on the gritty floor and swung it into the rock. Chips flew, but no soul stuff spilled out.

Three hours of hard work intervened before I got my first soul spurt.

Hastily dropping the pick, I grabbed my soul bucket and positioned it under the dribble of gooey black bile that jetted feebly from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the wall. When the spurt tailed off, I had about four inches of churning, turbid matter in my bucket. I tentatively dipped my fingers into the greasy roiling plasm, trying to sense the shape of the limerick that I would have to pull with much exertion out of the vile mass, once aboveground. I got a faint sense of the rhymes—something about "patches" and "Natchez" — before I withdrew my fingers.

Well, it wouldn't earn me any literary prizes, but it might help pay the rent.

Around noon, just as I was eating my lunch, Huntsman came galloping down the narrow corridor and I knew there was trouble.

"It's that damn young fool Goodenow! He's got ahold of an allegory and won't let go!"

Huntsman raced off in the direction of Christian Literature, and I hastened after him.

A whole crowd of soul miners had formed a human chain in an attempt to rescue Goodenow from his fatal connection with the allegory. They were pulling with all their might, but having no success budging Goodenow or his tainted catch.

At the far end of the chain, Goodenow himself grasped the spiky tail of the amorphous allegory, which was half-buried in a fracture of the rock, seeking to escape deeper into the strata of the mythic subconscious.

"Gifford," I shouted, "let the damn thing go! Allegory's been the death of many a finer writer than you!"

"No, Rex, I can handle it! I just need the right protagonist to tame it — "

The youthful fool had more ambition than common sense, but you had to admire his spirit. I remembered when I had been just as full of zeal. But that seemed an age ago.

There must have been an irony leak nearby. Because at the exact moment Gifford made his boast, the allegory poured on more power and pulled Gifford Goodenow right into the crack before he could let go of its sticky skin. The resulting messy compression and exsanguination of Gifford's body was not a pleasant sight. We were just lucky not to lose anyone else.

Well, needless to say, the rest of the shift passed under a definite pall. I doubt that anyone brought more than a vignette or an aphorism out of the soul mine that sad day.

As I was riding the elevator up, clutching my pail with the lone limerick in it, I pondered the twists

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of fate that had consigned me to the narrative pit. I began to feel a little self-pity and even shame.

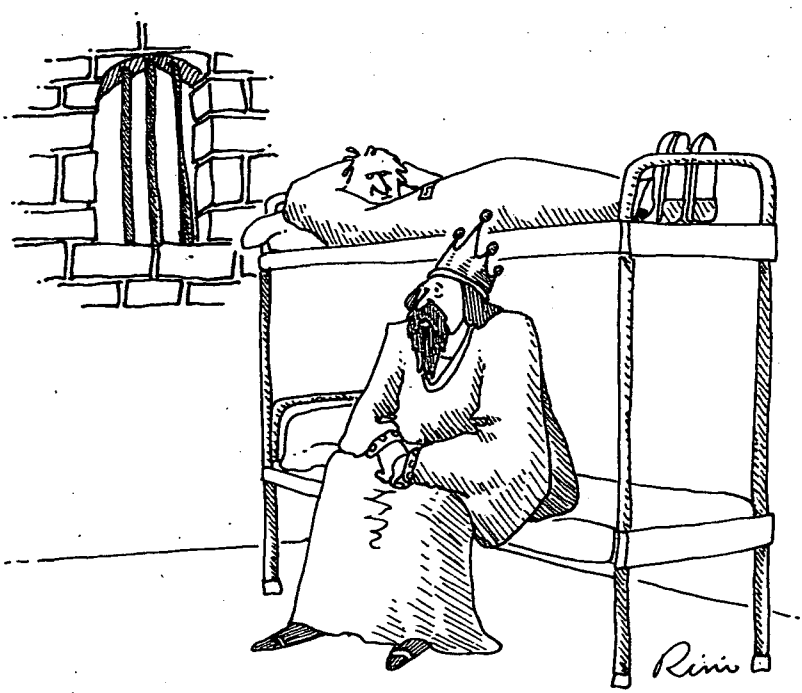
Sensing my downcast mood, Ilona Rhinebeck dug into her own soul bucket, grabbed a mass of sludge, and dumped it atop my limerick.

"For the kids," she said.

When I got home and the hearty family greetings were over, I disentangled Ilona's contribution from the limerick and handed it to Ricardo and Ricardina.

It turned out to be an embryonic Young Adult fantasy novel.

Watching their happy faces as they poked and prodded the squealing juvenile, I realized I wouldn't really want to work anywhere else.



"What hurts isn't losing the kingdom. My editor won't return my calls."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carter Scholz's novels include Palimpsests *(cowritten with Glenn Harcourt) and, more recently,* Radiance. *Twelve of his short stories were collected recently in* The Amount to Carry. *He is also a musician whose album,* Eight Pieces, *is computer compositions in complex intonational systems. His latest piece, "Rhythmicon," was performed in May by seventeen guitarists at MicroFest in Los Angeles. His new story, the first to appear in our pages in far too long, is a musically-minded tale that serves as a good reminder of just how big a world it is, after all.*

I Didn't Know What Time It Was

By Carter Scholz

OUTSIDE THE V-NOTE, A number of bums stood around the windows looking in. Inside, Monk was playing "Well You Needn't." The place was smoky and full of mostly white faces, male college types, some couples, groups sitting at tables. I couldn't get past the bar.

Monk was in the bridge ignoring the melody, sweating and banging out a major second in Monk time. Monk time is never quite where you expect it, until suddenly it is again. He moved the major second up a semitone, then he moved it down again. He loved that second. He kept it going with his right hand while he pulled out a handkerchief with his left hand and wiped his brow. When the head came around he finally skimmed down a whole tone scale and sat back to let Trane solo.

At the bar looking suave in an Italian suit was Miles Dewey Davis. Trane fumbled his entrance and Miles's expression was blank. Then he smiled slightly as Trane kept on with the fumble like he meant it. Over on the side of the room Coltrane's wife Naima sat with a small microphone and a Wollensak tape recorder.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I went to the end of the bar and bought a pack of Luckies. The guy next to me gave me a goofy smile and said, L.S.M.F.T., man, Lucky Strike means fine tobacco. He had a tiny goatee, which is a look that maybe one white guy in twenty can pull off. He wasn't that guy.

A silver bud glinted in his ear, trailing a wire into his shirt pocket. He was listening to his PDA fill him in. Tourist. First timer. I turned away and lit up. It was always a kick to smoke indoors, a forbidden thrill where I came from.

I didn't have to see the goatee's PDA to know it was quality. Mine wasn't quality but it was mine and it worked. My pantemporal dilation apparatus. My personal time machine. Not what you think. I mean, how stupid is that. Let's go back and kill Hitler, make the world a better place. What's "better"?

Ahmed Abdul-Malik was leaning hard into his bass and I was digging it. But I wasn't here for Monk or his sidemen. The backwash from more powerful PDAs had dragged me here. No disrespect to the hat and beard, but I'd seen this set before. This time I'd come to hear my man Eric. He doesn't show up on the hotlists, but I knew he was playing in the neighborhood.

I went to the crapper, dropped my cigarette and crushed it out. I tore the top off the packet and — what a waste — dumped the cigarettes into the trash. The ivory block of my PDA hid neatly in the packet, the dial and readout facing up. July 20, 1957.

When I came out Trane was ripping up the place with scales from Russia. The goatee at the bar, listening to his PDA, bounced up and down like he knew what it meant. Skinny nowhere white guy like me. He looked like he was on U. Just like me.

I walked out on Trane and into the New York summer night. That trademark smell of iron, urine, and asphalt. A black slash of infinity rose up forever between the buildings. The Third Avenue El roared by, its sound receding into a mix of car horns, sirens, background hum. I tried to spot the tourists among the natives. A pair of cops in short sleeves went by. On their biceps were matched tattoos, edges visible just below the sleeve, curved pincers touching to complete a circle.

After they passed I went into an alley, put the bead in my ear, and dialed. Eric wasn't on any hotlist, but I knew that he gigged the V-Note for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

most of summer 1961. So I dialed ahead four years exactly. I felt the tingling and humming back behind the bead, the realignment in my skull. The night shimmered with the vertigo of all possibility; then reality settled back around me. July 16, 1961, said the readout. I walked out of the alley at New York speed, and let the whisper in my ear guide me up Cooper Square to St. Mark's Place.

Soon I was at the V-Note again. Now the placard said: Eric Dolphy Quintet with Booker Little. I paid the cover and went in. Miles was here again. For a second I foolishly wondered how he'd managed to jump ahead with me. He was sitting at a table with a white woman. Every so often he smiled at her, and when he did, his whole prince of darkness thing fell apart. He looked like a delighted kid.

I went to the bar and ordered a Gibson. I half expected to see the LSMFT guy again. Then I did see him. Or maybe not. It's hard to tell the goatees apart.

It wasn't a full house. Natives, mostly. Tourists had to go looking for Dolphy. Acts come on and off the main menus, and maybe that means that the past is being changed, or maybe it's how the theory sites say: your memory adjusts to the changed history. The fact is, tourists don't care. I cared, but since this was the first time I'd found Eric, I wasn't going to worry about it.

An MC came onstage. He was a little moonfaced cat with an impish smile and a natty mustache, in a Brooks Brothers suit. He smoothed the fabric over his pot while his lazy eyes counted the house. He didn't seem impressed.

Layduz jemmin! Welcome the very latest sound in jazz, Mister Eric Dolphy, featuring the new trumpet sensation, Booker Little! How bout a big hand now! Mister Eric Dolphy!

Applause was fierce but sparse. He was smaller than I expected. Almost frail. He looked nervous. But it was him all right. Domed forehead, broad lips, thick eyebrows, mustache, goatee. He shut his eyes and for a few seconds was still. A kind of spiritual energy went out from his stillness.

He lifted his flute and the opening notes of "Don't Blame Me" spilled out. It surprised me. I thought I knew everything about these dates, but that tune wasn't on my list. It appeared to surprise the MC, too, who moved closer to the bandstand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was a sweet ballad, with lots of room for filigree, and Eric made the most of it. He frowned throughout his entire solo, and he kept pushing the flute's sweetness into harshness, as if he could find notes there that nobody else could.

During the applause he set down the flute and picked up his bass clarinet. He nodded at Booker and they swung hard into "Aggression." Booker soloed for about five minutes. Eric's horn solo was even harsher. He was sweating, jabbing runs in against the time. Then he launched into outer space. I knew this cut, all the bonus tracks, the variants, but I'd never heard this. Booker sat down, stared at Dolphy, and put his trumpet on the floor. Mal Waldron quit playing and leaned on the piano desk. For a while the bass and drums tried to sketch out where Eric was supposed to be in the tune, but he was always somewhere else. Then they stopped completely, and Eric was honking and wailing and stuttering all by himself, gasping deep breaths between runs.

The MC was at the edge of the bandstand now. He stood there for about a minute. Then he looked over his shoulder and made a gesture.

Dolphy was manhandled offstage by three burly white guys with those tattoos on their biceps. As their sleeves rode up you could see where the top of the pincers joined a pair of circles in a trefoil. Booker moved back to let the MC up on the bandstand. The MC was smiling but his eyes were deadly.

Layduz jemmin sorry for the irruption. We'll take a ten-minute intermission. The bar is open.

I got up and went out into the street. As I passed the alley I heard a metal door clang open.

The MC was shoving him out the door. He was still holding his horn. You come in here playing like some hopped up Bird — !

Hey man, I ain't Bird! Hey hey give me that —

And you *don't* come in here with your goddamn smack! The MC threw something to the pavement and stepped on it.

Shit man! That's my insulin!

The door slammed. Eric looked at the ground and shook his head. I went into the alley.

What happened?

He looked up and took me in.

Seems the gentleman didn't like the way I played.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Who is that guy? Since when is there an MC at the V-Note?

Mister Winston, we call him. From the Ministry of True Jazz. Used to perform, himself. I got to go...and he started walking.

Hey listen, I said, I came to see you...!

He stopped. Yeah, sure you did.

No, I mean it, you're the greatest. What you did in there —

He looked at me, smiling a little. You like that weird shit?

Well...yeah.

Least I can play. Most of these cats here can't barely play their instruments.

That's a little...harsh, isn't it?

No idea, he said. White boy's got no idea what he's talkin about. You want to get hip? Come on with me.

We turned and walked a few blocks. I was walking with Eric Dolphy and I couldn't think of a thing to say that wasn't stupid. I've heard all your albums. Where do you live? How much do you practice? Who are your favorite sidemen?

We stopped at a red light and the El thundered overhead. The V-Note — another V-Note? — came up before us.

Hey did we turn around or...?

Miles came out of the basement with the white woman. They were smiling and talking. He stopped under the streetlamp to light a cigarette. Almost immediately a cop in short sleeves came up.

No loitering, the cop said to Miles. Move along.

I work here, said Miles.

I said move.

I'm not goin nowhere, I'm just getting a breath of air.

Move now!

What are you gonna do, lock me up?

The cop reached for Miles's wrist. Miles pulled away. Another guy in plainclothes came out of nowhere with a nightstick. Miles went down, cursing, holding his head. Blood seeped out between his fingers. A crowd had gathered.

Move it along! Nothing to see. The plainclothes cop looked hard at me. I felt a hand on my arm pulling me away. The hand was Dolphy's.

Miles, he's fucked now, they'll pull his card. You can't work in this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

town without a card. He looked at me expectantly, as if to see if I got it. I was trying to think through how Miles had been at the first club four years ago, the second one tonight, now here again.

It was never a life, Eric said. You try to make it one, and that's what you get. Live fast, die young, leave a catalog, that's all they ever wanted.

Hey, I said, alarmed. You don't want to do that. You want to take care of yourself. Especially, you know, your diabetes.

He looked at me again, quick and suspicious. It's how he died..Would die. Not drugs, not alcohol, just negligence of blood sugar. He looked at me like he was trying to figure out what I meant. Then he got angry.

I don't want to do what? Leave a catalog? What the hell do you think I'm doin here beatin my head against this wall?

No, not that, I mean, just, you don't have to die so young.

I'd blown it. How was I supposed to know when he'd die? Now his expression was dire.

Who the hell are you to tell me that? You think I don't know the history? The whole fucking necrology of jazz? Bird gone at thirty-four, Fats at twenty-seven, Clifford at twenty-six, Bud, Trane, Booker.... He looked back toward the club and shook his head. Not me, man. I'm not walkin that road.

I got some of it...but Bud Powell and Coltrane? They were alive. Booker had been right there onstage with him. Had I got off on some other time track, some other 1961 where history had changed? I tried to look at my PDA but I couldn't read it inside the Luckies pack.

Don't you get it yet? I'm a performer, man.

Yeah, I know, you're great — . As I looked down into my pocket he grabbed me by the collar, pulled out the Luckies pack, and threw it to the ground.

Hey — ! That's my — ! and I was down on my knees trying to find it.

That's your what. Say it.

That's my — !

You ever try to dial that shit forward of about, like, 1963? See how far you get.

The case was broken. I picked it out of the gutter and as I stood to inspect it he snapped his fingers under my nose. Yo! Wake up, man! Look at me instead of that shit!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His face swam in and out of focus. He didn't look like Dolphy now. He wasn't skinny. He wasn't spiritual. He was big, ungainly. His forehead receded, and he had a long scar down one cheek. He didn't even have a mustache or goatee. I could see a few silver marks at the corners of his lips, his eyes, his nose. When he spoke, when those spots moved, his features shimmered like a dream and he still looked a little like Dolphy to me.

Listen to me, he said. They got the music, the recordings, they tied up copyright for the next hundred years, but that's not enough for them. You got to put a face on it. So they expanded copyright to cover the content, the image, the likeness, the life, everything. We need the whole package, they said. So here we are. Owned again.

Where do you think you are? he said. I got busted for that shit you're on now. That U. Nice stuff, isn't it. Take enough you can believe whatever. It's legal in here, but I got five to ten for dealing it on the street. I did three years and got parole cause I can play, so now I got this *good job* lip-syncing old Dolphy gigs. Thing is, I really can play. And I got sick of pretending it's seventy years ago. Sick of *livin the life.* All you want of H and U and whatever else. Some of these sorry motherfuckers take so much they actually think they're Bird. That shit in your Luckies pack, you got the guided tour. The drug, the post-hypnotic suggestion, the scenery — he spread his arms to embrace the alley, the back door of the V-Note — and the performers. Welcome to Birdland. He raised the horn to his lips, and played two fast and perfect bars of "Ornithology."

I looked at my dead PDA: I was waking from a good dream. He wasn't Dolphy. He was a nobody from prison with a pawn shop horn. I wasn't anywhere but on vacation from my own life.

He walked off holding the horn in one hand and I followed. Maybe it shouldn't have surprised me when Eighth Street crossed Fifty-second Street. Somewhere I heard a trumpet playing "Perdido." Around the next corner was the Cotton Club. From there, way up in Harlem, where it was still 1930 and Duke's orchestra glided through "Mood Indigo," we crossed a street into downtown Chicago, where a sign outside the Dreamland Cafe announced Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five, a band that had never played live. The El thundered overhead.

None of that free jazz shit in *our* Chicago, he said.

You mean, all this...everyone...Miles...?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We got a couple of Miles who just hang out. Tourists like to see him around. It's value added. That's a famous incident you witnessed back there. 1959 it happened, outside of Birdland. They don't always trouble to get the details exactly right.

And your insulin, I said. Another prop?

Oh no, he said. I got diabetes all right. Induced. That's their *verisimilitude*.

We were out somewhere near the East River. He stood listening for something, it seemed, fingering the keys of his horn.

Guess they'll take Eric off the menus for good now. He was always too now for them. Trane, they'll want to keep an eye on him. Keep him on the Disney tunes. He honked a few notes of "My Favorite Things."

Then he started to really play, taking up more or less where he'd been interrupted on the bandstand. It wasn't like anything I'd ever heard. Started like a kind of lament but moved quickly into toughness. It filled me with, what exactly? Not sadness. Despair, I guess. It came at me like a torrent of bad news, stopping and starting, moving in and out of time, skidding and surfing on top of that news. Here we are in the present, this is what it looks like, and that's all there is; how do you like it? When he quit I heard a far-off thudding sound, polyrhythmic, the thing he must have been riffing off.

You don't get it, he said. He was smiling.

I got it but I didn't like it. Like every tourist, I didn't want to be in the pain of the present, and I didn't want to be reminded that I had no choice.

Uh oh, he said. Here comes Mickey.

Two guys rounded the corner. They were in sleeveless T-shirts. In the streetlight I could see their tattoos, the razorwire trefoil, the round head and two ears.

Let's go, iron man, said one to Dolphy.

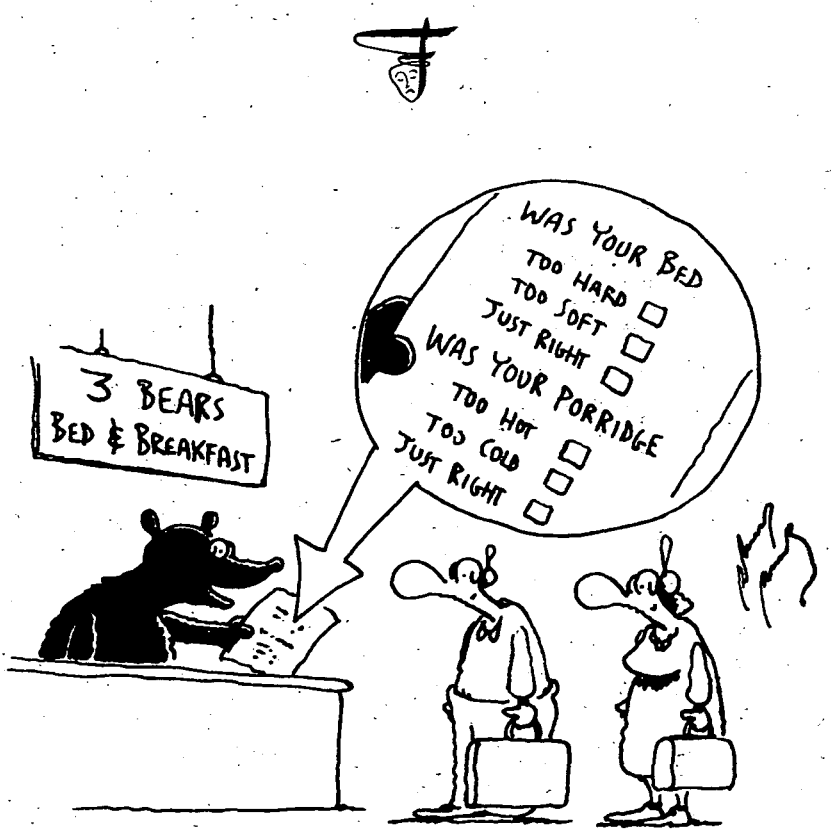
Outside the V-Note the bums were still standing around. The club was closed. We were the trash on the street. The robot sweepers scurried toward us like cartoon rats. We bums took the hint and dispersed.

I went down Great Jones Street toward the East River. Dawn lighted the New York skyline and made it look flat as a set. Past some dumpsters and a couple of police barriers, the street abruptly ended in chainlink

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

overlooking not the river, not Brooklyn, not Queens, but gray ocean to the horizon. There was a sea breeze, blood warm, redolent, tropical.

Half a mile offshore, breakers exploded against the great Florida seawall. Barges carrying cranes floated there, ready to stack concrete caissons on the wall. The Dutch piledrivers were thudding as they had been all night. Now they were all I could hear. A couple of cops came along to return me to that blasted world.



"Thank you for staying with us, and please fill out this questionnaire at your convenience."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Here we have a new short-short from Mr. Porges, whose stories have been gracing our pages for fifty-odd years. Enthusiasts of Mr. Porges's work should take a look at his extensive fan site at http://www.fortunecity.co.uk/jodrellbank/gargoyle/7/, *but don't think for a minute that any part of that URL has any bearing on this new story, no sirree...*

What I Owe to Rick

By Arthur Porges

LOOKING BACK, IT'S CLEAR I was the only one, thanks to years of research into obscure myths and folklore, who could have saved poor Rick Meech, my friend and neighbor. All the clues were there, but my mind was not receptive, a great irony, since it was clearly a perfect receiver for them. It's as if an experienced dermatologist, talking to a friend, didn't notice a giant multicolored melanoma in the middle of his forehead.

He mentioned, quite emphatically, finding a strange object, apparently an egg, but without the typical ovoid shape; rather, it was like a hexahedron, a solid with six flat faces. More significant, and I should have caught it immediately, he claimed to have found it not among the hens, where eggs belong, but in a separate little hut where he kept an aggressive rooster, Conquistador.

Anyhow, he took the puzzling object to the garden, where the light was better, for a closer examination; but when his wife yelled from the house that he had a phone call, he put it on a flat rock and left it there. When he returned twenty minutes later, the egg had vanished, but even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more queer was a group of toads, numbering at least twelve, milling about the rock. Even one in this semi-arid region of manicured lawns is far from common, so he had to wonder.

That seemed to be the end of the matter, if not the mystery, until five weeks later, when a neighbor spotted him staggering out of the front gate, waving his arms wildly and shouting incoherent phrases. He fell dead within a few minutes. At the same time, what seemed to be a small, very glittery lizard with a mitre-like crest ran with weasel-like speed and agility into the street, where it scuttled through a sewer-grate and disappeared.

The police, spurred by Rick's family and friends, explored the sewer, but found only a number of dead rats. I inferred, but said nothing, not wishing to be considered crazy, that the big rodents must have thought here was easy prey and a nice snack, only to learn too late that the scaly beast's breath and gaze are both deadly. Breathe near it, or stare into its yellow, feral eyes and you die.

What we have here, at large in this sedate community, can be nothing else than that terrifying legendary beast, a Basilisk, hatched by a toad (or serpent) from a cock's egg.

Now, obviously, it must be destroyed. Just as Perseus defeated Medusa by tricking her into directing her gaze into his burnished shield so that like her victims she turned to stone, so I must also make use of the Basilisk's reflection, the sight of which kills it.

I must acquire a good mirror, the vanity type with a handle, a flashlight, and, of course, a gas-mask. With these, extreme caution, and a bit of luck I can surely rid the world of this dreadful little monster, the first in centuries, I suspect, to appear. I owe it to Rick. I am terrified of facing it down in that dark sewer, but have no choice, being the only one who knows what to do. May God help me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Last year saw the publication of Albert Cowdrey's novel Crux, *a science fiction novel set several centuries in the future. Of late, Mr. Cowdrey has focused more of his work on present-day stories set in his endlessly interesting hometown of New Orleans. With "The Housewarming," his third Crescent City tale for the year, he gives us a yarn that's sure to resonate with anybody who has moved recently.*

The Housewarming

By Albert E. Cowdrey

"NOW, PHIL," SAID NANCY Forêt, "I know you believe in souls and all that crap — "

"No more," he said flatly. She was still thinking of him as the priest he'd almost become. Years ago, during their brief intense relationship, she used to call him Altar Boy.

"Well, of course you were defrocked — "

"I was not," he said with dignity. "I found out I didn't believe the stuff they were handing out at the seminary. Besides, not being a pedophile, I felt out of place. So I left. But what's all this got to do with real estate?"

"See over there? That old stable against the wall? Well, it's haunted."

Phil Santos threw back his head and laughed and his bray bounced around the courtyard and echoed back. The ghost put the cap on an odd morning.

One-eleven Rêve Street, an hour ago when Phil first saw it, seemed to consist of a big door — two tall, thick nineteenth-century oak panels — set in a high brick wall. Cat's-claw vines topped the wall and provided

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nesting sites for noisy but unseen birds. Nothing else. Sprayed-on gang graffiti and recumbent gutter punks completed the local scene.

"Damn," he'd muttered, recalling the phone call that had brought him here. Nancy was trying to sell him *this*?

Then she pulled up to the curb in the big gray Jag she drove to impress her clients — *Hey, this lady must handle upscale property, right*? — and got out.

As usual, she looked businesslike in basic black, with a single gold pin in the shape of a dollar sign on her large firm bosom. At a few years short of forty, her face was twenty-something smooth, her hair glossy and fragrant.

With embarrassment, Phil had felt his heart speed up a couple of syncopated beats. Was it possible for even an altar boy to cling so long to the image of his first love? Apparently so.

Nancy let him peck her cheek, but that was all. Sometimes the way she held him at arm's length made him wonder if she still felt something for him, too. If so, she concealed it well.

"Now Phil," she began, "I know this property doesn't look too great from the outside."

"Honey, you got a real gift for understatement."

He helped her turn an old brass key in the lock and drag open the door. A hot late-summer breeze tossed random bits of litter like confetti on the paving stones of a vaulted carriageway.

"I guess there's a house in here?" he asked.

"Wait. It's really a secret kind of place."

Their voices raised echoes. They entered a courtyard enclosed by high walls where ferns had taken root in cracks and crannies. And yes, there was a house after all, and it was old and handsome.

Galleries overlooked the patio; rough tawny stucco walls glowed in a shaft of sunlight. A two-story wooden ell once had provided housing for servants. Doves fluttered about the eaves, cooing obsessively. Above the slate roof and Dickensian chimney pots hung the worn silver coin of a daytime moon.

"It's totally unspoiled," she pointed out, and he had to agree.

Producing more keys, Nancy led him through high-ceilinged rooms that would need minimum work to be made livable and salable. Phil found

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

himself planning the renovation: over here, a new master bath with retro fittings — quadruped tub and marble lav; over there, a new kitchen with granite countertops and enormous costly range.

Sure, the neighborhood stank. But move in a pair of yuppies and a brace of Rottweilers, and hey — another victory for urban homesteading!

"You can't help but make money," Nancy said, seductively. "The owner only wants six-fifty for it."

"I truly admire your ability to say that with a straight face."

"It belongs to a real estate investment trust. The REIT's getting rid of a bunch of less desirable properties, so they're open to offers."

Outside again, Phil stood for several minutes absorbing the feel of the patio. Haunted by little pale geckos, it was like the bottom of a well; not a single neighbor's window looked into it. Suddenly he understood — 111 Rêve Street had been built for stealthy pleasures.

"Who was the original owner?" he grinned. "A prominent madam? A disciple of the Mad Marquis?"

Nancy raised well-plucked eyebrows. "That's really clever of you, Phil. His name was Alfonso Villarubia. He was a cotton factor in the 1840's, and he died at his own housewarming from an overdose of Spanish fly. In his obit the *Picayune* commented on his 'singular propensities' without, dammit, revealing exactly what they were."

She hesitated as if about to take a plunge. Hesitation was so unlike her that he stared. "Now Phil," she began, "I know you believe in souls...."

Then followed the ghost stuff that left him laughing out loud. Trust Nancy to come up with a hook nobody else would ever have thought of! *A unique feature of this desirable, fully reconditioned early-Victorian gem is the ghost in the stable.*

"Just don't go in there after dark," she went on, "unless you want a really bad case of the willies. A rent-a-cop from the REIT checked the place out one night, and he wound up on Thorazine."

She led him across the mossy flagstones to the one-story building. Inside, the walls were bare bricks and beams, the floor wide pine boards with gaps between for easier mucking out. A skylight suggested that at some point Dobbin's dwelling had been turned to other purposes. Shelves of cloudy bottles, a stained work table and a rusty sink hinted at a taste for chemistry. In the corner stood an iron cot with a thin, stained mattress.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who was the mad scientist?" he asked.

"No idea. Some old woman lived here for about a million years. Well, that's one-eleven," she finished abruptly. "So, Phil, would you like to make me an offer?"

"Oh...why the hell not?"

He followed the Jag to her office, where she wrote up his offer for something called Deep Delta Real Estate Investment Trust to consider. Within sixty days Phil Santos became owner of 111 Rêve Street and all that lay within it.

Whatever that might be.

Everything went fine at first. A month after the act of sale, New Orleans got a new and serious police chief and a federal grant that enabled him to flood murder-prone areas with cops.

Rêve Street was one of the first to benefit, and soon the neighbors started crawling out of their dens like lizards, blinking in the sunlight — and even in the moonlight, which many of them hadn't seen for years, except through barred windows. Property values started to rise and developers began nosing around. Meantime Phil's contractor had set to work, rewiring and replumbing, sanding floors and polishing and painting and papering, bringing in three phone lines and cable TV. The stable served for storage; the workmen left at five P.M., and the spare sheetrock and the paint cans and other detritus they left overnight did not seem to disturb the ghost.

For Phil, redoing the place was fun. It was so odd — unique, really. Nothing like it in the Quarter, where every house looked outward to the street as well as inward to the patio. One-eleven was a mystic, all its attention turned within. He tracked bargains, getting a deal from the Stone Company on granite countertops for the kitchen, buying fittings from a bankrupt plumbing supply company for the baths.

He took to coming by after the workmen had gone — parking his Honda beside the stable, climbing out with a bottle of wine, sprawling on one of the old-looking new iron benches. Drinking slowly from a plastic cup while the sky turned red, then purple, and finally blue-black. Watching the evening star emerge, the sole eye privileged to look into his kingdom.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The ghost stayed in the dark stable. Phil sensed nothing in the patio but vagrant winds and the scent of flowers, delicate or cloying. From somewhere came echoes of music — the expected snatches of rap and rock, but also something older, a bit offkey as if tuned to an unfamiliar scale. Maybe a bunch of medieval-music freaks, sitting around a slum apartment nearby, tootling recorders and sawing rebecs. The Rêve Street Consort.

That made him smile. You can take the boy out of the seminary, he thought wryly, but you can't take the seminary out of the boy. Long years after quitting St. Jude's, he still longed for a place of refuge, with high walls shutting the world out and distant notes of ancient music.

He drank his last cupful of wine to one-eleven's previous owners — to Alfonso Villarubia, the old woman, all the others whose names he'd never know. To live in this place, surely they must have wanted something out of the ordinary, too.

When he was ready to leave, he turned on the patio lights and checked the locks on the house and the carriageway doors before heading home. He saw no reason to lock the stable. In time, this had tragic consequences.

AMONG THE gutter punks littering the neighborhood was a seventeen-year-old runaway from North Dakota named Steve. No last name; Steve Nobody.

Steve was schizophrenic, HIV-positive, and when conscious spent a lot of time arguing metaphysical questions with the phantasms that populated his head. At any rate, that was what other members of his tribe told the cops when they came inquiring.

With the workmen gone, Phil's gardener was creating a new look for the patio with bedded oleanders and flowering shrubs in yellow-glazed Spanish ollas. Maybe he left the doors to the carriageway unlocked when he went to lunch, and that was when Steve slipped inside, carrying his stash of pills, and hid in the stable behind the sheetrock panels.

Maybe he was thinking he'd be safer spending the night there than on the street or in a shelter. If so, he was wrong.

Next morning, while Phil was sipping his second cup of coffee in his condo uptown, he got a call from the gardener, considerably shaken. Coming to work, he'd found a body lying in the carriageway and called the cops.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Phil drove downtown to check the situation out. A big black detective let him slip under slick yellow tape being strung by a uniformed cop. Just inside the heavy oak panels of the carriageway door, the still nameless corpse was lying in a hunched-forward position with arms folded underneath. Despite a pool of blood around the head, it didn't look particularly damaged, except that it had no neck.

"He run head-on into the door," said the detective. "Hard, too. Look to me like some of his backbone is down inside his chest."

"Going about forty m.p.h.," volunteered the cop, whom the detective ignored.

"We found his pills in that building over there," said the detective, pointing. "He prolly saw snakes or something coming out the walls, and took off."

"I'm sure you're right," said Phil, looking away.

"You know, it's funny," said the uniformed cop, a meaty young guy with a broad, puzzled face. As before, the detective ignored him.

"What is?" Phil asked.

"I was here oncet before. Six, seven months ago. The big door was standing half open, and a neighbor seen this old lady laying here dead."

"What, right here?"

"Yeah. In just about the same place as this one. Funny, huh?"

Back in his car, Phil searched through a pack of business cards fattening his wallet, picked one and punched a beeper number into his cell phone.

"Nancy," he barked when she rang him back.

"What?"

"Did you know the old woman was found dead right inside the door of one-eleven?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. So what? People have to die someplace."

"I'll tell you so what. Now I got a kid dead too, lying right where she was. What do you say to that?"

"What am I supposed to say? I didn't know her."

"You don't remember her name?"

"W, I think. Something like that."

"Like the president?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, some name that sounded like W. She was about a hundred years old. Look, exactly what's the problem, Phil? Who was the dead kid?"

"Well, he was a street punk. A druggie."

"Oh, for heaven sakes. An old, ancient woman and a druggie. People like that die all the time. I know it's kind of weird, finding both of them in the same place, but coincidences do look weird. You think there must be a pattern, only there isn't."

Exactly what *was* Phil bothered about? A dead boy, a patternless pattern? He didn't protest when Nancy switched the subject.

"Look, I want to talk to you about one-eleven," she said. "If you're not tied up, let's do lunch at La Chaumière."

This was the newest hottest place in the French Quarter, where common mortals famously waited six months for a reservation. Nancy now revealed that she owned it, had a permanently reserved table, and went whenever she pleased.

"How could you afford to buy a place like that?" Phil asked, astonished.

"My divorce was more profitable than I expected," she told him. "One o'clock okay?"

It was. Sitting across from her, sipping an iconic martini, Phil looked around La Chaumière and noted how — with exposed beams, prints from old French garden books and bestiaries, rusty scythes and oaken ox-yokes, handwoven baskets of fresh flowers and bright, slightly lopsided Provençal pottery — somebody had given a country-inn feeling to a feed trough of well-to-do urbanites.

Considering her ability to manipulate reality, he wondered if Nancy might have chosen the decor. What an odd pair they'd made, after all — the Altar Boy and the Artful Dodger. No wonder it didn't last.

The food arrived, and it was fancy but filling and the waiters groveled nicely. Phil sprang for a grossly overpriced bottle of Vouvray and was floating in a mild alcoholic buzz when Nancy asked him about his plans for 111 Rêve Street.

He sighed. "Sell quick and get out, I'm afraid."

"Oh, Phil, that's so dumb. Take my advice and hold onto it for a while. I've got a dozen new listings for that neighborhood. There's a paradigm shift underway. Values will double or triple in the next few years."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I've got a load of short-term notes to cover. The interest's eating me up."

"Then let me sell your condo for you. It's at peak anyway, and it's got no place to go but down. On the other hand, one-eleven's got no place to go but up. Clear your debts, live there for a while, enjoy it. Let it soar."

"*Sell my apartment?*" Her sheer brass still had the power to amaze him.

"Why not? With one-eleven as your principal residence, you won't have to pay capital gains on the first quarter mil of profit. With that and the twenty percent renovation tax credit, you'll make a real killing when you sell."

"Forget it. No way."

"Oh, Phil. You're afraid of the ghost."

"Bullcrap," he said, thinking of his long private sessions in the dark patio.

She held out her glass for a refill. "Just think it over, okay? In time you'll come to see it the way I do."

"No. Absolutely not. Never."

When Phil put his condo on the market, Nancy took all of a week to sell it for top dollar.

The buyer was a young Texan who was blissfully unaware of the fact that in a year or two — besides the mortgage, fees and taxes — he'd also face an assessment in the twenty K range when the building's deteriorating roof had to be replaced.

Nancy managed the closing with all her customary expertise, and Phil signed the papers while smiling at the Texan and thinking, "Tough on you, pal."

It was exhilarating, doing business Nancy's way for once, instead of with his usual scrupulous fairness. And no doubt about it: she'd read his mind. He was doing what he really wanted to do — take over one-eleven, and live for a while behind its walls.

He moved in on a warm autumn afternoon. Rêve Street was peaceful. Kids were playing stickball and gossiping grannies sat on stoops from which developers would soon evict them. Guys with strong backs carried in his furniture, because the big van couldn't fit through the carriageway. When the movers suggested piling some of the crates and boxes in the stable, Phil told them, "Nuh uh. It's full of rats."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He waited until they were gone to check the stable out. He had to unlock it to do so, because after Steve's death he'd personally fitted the door with a hasp and a blue-steel padlock. Inside the little building, with its vague smell of disuse, everything looked normal. The sheetrock had been removed, the cot and the bottles thrown away, the cabinet turned into a paint locker. The skylight illuminated every corner; there was no place for anything to hide, even a ghost.

Phil slept that night on a mattress on the floor of his new bedroom. The next week was devoted to sorting out boxes, shoving furniture around, putting books on shelves in his study, hanging his pictures. A Sunday painter, he did abstracts that Nancy had compared unkindly to an explosion in a stained-glass studio. But they brightened the walls.

He was a little embarrassed to discover how many devotional books he still kept: an old Latin missal, *The Imitation of Christ*, St. Thomas's *Summa*, St. Augustine's *City of God*.

"Look, all I do these days is fix up old houses," he told the books. But he put them on his new shelves anyway.

Like Nancy, the books reminded him of an enduring passion. In this case, a yearning to know what the universe really was about. Beside the religious books he put a few tomes on science — Darwin's *Origin*, Stephen Jay Gould's essays, a life of Einstein. He'd found them disappointing, too. Religion meant something, but had all the facts wrong; science had the facts right, but meant nothing to him.

On the lowest shelf went art books, and the same theme reappeared. A volume of El Greco's mystical Spaniards — their thin faces, licorice-drop eyes and blue chins much like Phil's own — stretching their bodies, yearning skyward. Bosch's nightmares of toads and tiny monsters and little black devils. Oh yeah, thought Phil with wry self-knowledge. What he read in his library were the secrets of his own unfulfilled heart.

When everything was in order at last, like Jehovah he took a day off to admire his own handiwork. The house glowed; the new plantings had already managed to produce a few autumnal flowers: scarlet camellias, other blossoms nameless in pink, cupped and hollow like small breasts seen from inside. Phil felt his lungs expand; even his shoes seemed looser. Home at last!

Now that one-eleven was really his, he wanted to show it off. That

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evening he drank his usual toast to the previous owners and put in a call to the black lady who did parties for him. He e-mailed invitations to his few friends and many business contacts, hired a zydeco band, and gave a big order to Martin's Wine Cellar.

The night of the party, Nancy arrived with a fat, spade-bearded guy as her escort. She seemed genuinely stunned by the transformation he'd wrought in one-eleven.

"Oh, Phil, it's *gorgeous*," she said. He merely nodded. She was right; it was.

The November night was warm and the guests flowed from house to patio and back again. Everybody loved the up-to-date retro reworking of one-eleven's interior. Everybody was fascinated by the story of the ghost in the stable. Everybody danced to Cajun music and soaked up booze. Nobody died taking Spanish fly, but a lot of dick-stiffeners got consumed; even young guys were taking the drugs as enhancers.

A tad past midnight, Phil was doing a snuggle with Nancy on the upper gallery of the servants' wing. He was trying to get her to help him warm his bed, as well as his house.

When he came out of the seminary as a twenty-two-year-old virgin, he'd gone through agonies of long-delayed first love with her. Six years older than he and infinitely more experienced, she'd been fascinated by his naïveté, then lost interest when that faded. Still, he thought hopefully: revivals don't happen only in church.

Underneath the airy scent she wore, the indefinable smell of her body made his juices run embarrassingly; he'd taken no pills, but felt hidden stirrings anyway. When you lived an essentially celibate life — as he still did, more so than many of the clergy he'd known — passion assailed you suddenly, like a mugger.

Phil breathed damply into her left ear and murmured, "Why don't you stay over? We could add a whole new chapter to our meaningless relationship."

"Oh Phil, I can't."

"Sure you can. Come on, Honey. Let your date find his own way home."

"He's not my date, he's my husband."

"Your what?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Husband. We've been married for two years. His name's Felix Grossman. He's a lawyer specializing in real estate. We have so many interests in common, it just seemed natural to — "

She fell silent, her head turned and lowered.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought you weren't letting anybody into the stable after that kid died."

"I'm not."

"Then why's the light on?"

"There's no electricity in — "

He took that long to focus on the skylight of the stable down below. Not only was it dimly illuminated, but a shadow was moving around inside.

"Some idiot broke the lock," he muttered, and turned to head for the stairs.

"Phil," she said, grabbing his arm, "don't go down there. Please."

"Why not?"

"Don't. Please don't. It's a trap. It's meant to lure you in."

"Are you nuts?"

"Please."

They stood in the half dark with the sounds of life all around them. The band was taking a break and chatting with the guests; a CD was playing an Ella Fitzgerald scat song; laughter was chiming up from the patio, where friends or lovers wandered two by two among the fresh plantings.

Meanwhile the skylight of the stable glowed with a dull greenish light like a gibbous moon and the shadow played the game of shadows — changing shape, growing squatter, longer, shorter, as whatever was casting it moved around. Then the light expired in a slow, cinematic fadeout. Nancy drew a deep breath.

"Just stay out of there at night!" she whispered, and suddenly hugged him with a kind of desperation.

Phil was so surprised that he hardly registered the complete disconnect between her action and her face, which showed no emotion at all.

He took the next day off from work to tend his headache and think about his situation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At ten-oh-five he was lying in a tall Victorian bed in the master suite, a clean linen tester drooping over his head, morning sunlight pouring in through French doors opening on the courtyard.

The automatic coffee maker in his dressing room started to perk, and the deep black smell of Arabian beans filtered in. He poured a cup, returned to bed and sipped and thought about the light in the stable. What was most scary about it, he recognized, was the fact that Nancy had been scared. But of what, exactly?

He lay back on the pillows, mouthing coffee and thinking — for the first time seriously — about the rent-a-cop who'd had to go on Thorazine. About Steve Nobody. About the old woman named W. He put down the cup, reached for the phone book and spent a minute or two leafing through the blue pages. A cordless phone rested in its cradle by the bed, gazing at him with one red eye; he picked it up and tapped in the number of the coroner's office.

A bored city-employee-type voice answered. Phil explained that he owned the property where a young man had been found dead of head trauma, and could somebody give him more information about the case?

"We don't give out stuff like that."

"I'm concerned about, uh, possible legal liability. I can have my lawyer call you instead."

"Uhhh. I'll connect you with the lab."

"Thanks for your help."

"Uhhh."

A concert of elevator music followed. Then another and brisker voice answered, agreed to check, and informed him that the decedent had been identified as Steven B. Olafson of Minot, N.D.

"Sad case. Kid had a history of mental problems and drug use. But the blood tests indicated he was clean the night he died."

"He was what?"

"Clean. The cops had busted a couple of the main suppliers for that area, and there was a drought. Then this kid found a new supplier and a private place to take the stuff — but looks like he never got around to doing it."

Phil hung up, feeling a distinct chill. Whatever had driven Steve wild, it wasn't pills.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He got out of bed again, poured himself more coffee, and padded barefoot into his study. On his desk lay a fat file bulging with documents relating to one-eleven. Leafing through the wad of slick legal paper, he discovered in the title insurance documents that Deep Delta had bought the property from the estate of Henriette DuBlieux.

Then paused, baffled. He knew a little more, yet he really knew nothing. Nancy, the most fearless woman he'd ever known, had been scared last night. She knew something that she wasn't telling him, but what?

Trouble was, when you spent a while between the sheets with somebody, you thought you knew them. Dumb idea. He really knew very little about Nancy.

When they were together, she'd been a young businesswoman trying to make a buck in the devastated New Orleans real estate market during the oil bust. Her husband of the time, Jimmy Forêt — she still used his name in business, including the little hat over the e — had been an amiable Garden District drunk, accustomed to his wife's infidelities. His favorite joke when he met one of her lovers was a line of Rodney Dangerfield's: "What? You too?"

Phil remembered her moaning about Jimmy's fecklessness. Saying that his forte was spending money, not making it. "I think he wrote Chapter Thirteen," she said, meaning the personal bankruptcy law. Yet during that lunch at La Chaumière she'd told Phil that her divorce had been more profitable than she expected. How could it have been?

When you started thinking critically about Nancy, there were so many things that just didn't add up.

Well, she was going to give him the truth about this goddamn ghost, or else. He found his wallet in last night's trousers and started shuffling through the business cards, looking again for her beeper number.

And yeah, here was her card, announcing in embossed letters that she was Annette (Nancy) DuB. Forêt, Business and Domestic Properties, plus a string of letters for professional societies she belonged to.

"Oh, you lying bitch," he muttered.

What were the odds that her maiden name was DuBlieux? What were the odds that when Deep Delta bought one-eleven from Henriette DuBlieux's estate — no doubt for top dollar — it was really buying from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the old woman's heir, and the heir was Nancy? How many ways had she contrived to make money out of this unpromising property?

Phil returned to the Hewlett Packard and checked out the directors-of-record for Deep Delta REIT. There were only two: Annette and Felix Grossman.

He threw back his head and laughed. Had to — either that, or grab a gun and go kill the damned woman.

"HENRIETTE DUBLIEUX was my French grandfather's sister," a much subdued Nancy explained.

They were lunching at La Chaumière again. This time Nancy was bearing the entire expense, including the wine.

"I *suppose* I should've told you all this," she added, as if there was some doubt about it.

According to her, the story went all the way back to Alfonso Villarubia. "Some great-great-great-great of mine inherited everything he had — house, slaves, cotton business, brothel property, you name it. And one-eleven stayed in the family."

The DuBlieux family tree produced two kinds of shoots, people who made money and people who threw it away. Clear enough which tradition Nancy belonged to. As a girl she'd been fascinated by her great-aunt, who was just such another.

"I called her Tia," she explained, while the waiter was supplying them with platters of excellent grillades, stone-ground grits and mushroom flan. The wine was a Chianti.

"She was the smartest person I ever knew. She had a regular seat downtown at Broussard Frères, so she could watch the ticker tape come in. That was how she made her money, buying and selling stocks with absolutely uncanny foresight. I asked her once how she knew which stocks would go up. She said from her Tarot cards, and I never knew whether she was telling the truth or laughing at me.

"She had some kind of scientific degree from the Sorbonne, and she was always brewing things out in that stable she'd fixed up as a laboratory — creating her own cosmetics and making teas and infusions I had to drink when I was sick, because she said they worked better than antibiotics. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't think she made love potions. She claimed she could make any man want her, but she did that by another kind of chemistry.

"She must have been spectacular looking once — not a beauty, her face was like a cleaver, but rather stunning in a way, and up to the very end she had great clothes sense. You know the portrait by John Singer Sargent called *Madame X*? This very cold, very sexy-looking female with a bosom the color and probably the temperature of a snowbank? Madame X was a New Orleans woman too, one of the Gautreaux women, and I think Tia must have been the same type when she was young.

"Not that she was frigid! I saw technicolor photos of her from the Forties, wearing bizarre hats and sleek nylons and padded shoulders — her skirt up above her kneecaps, lipstick you could see a block away, and this insolent sort of try-me-if-you-dare expression on her face. She told me I should practice walking the way she did, very deliberately and slowly, at kind of a regal pace, because then every eye would be on me — women as well as men. I asked her which she enjoyed provoking more, lust or envy. She said both were *très agréable*.

"She gave me wonderful gifts, jewels and little gold music boxes that played strange tunes I've never heard anywhere else. Sarabands, tarantellas — I don't remember all the names she called them. I'd go to sleep with the sounds tinkling in my ear and dream about funny little animals dancing. Two-legged dogs with the heads of birds — and marabou storks that hopped around, looking so awkward and solemn — and a ridiculous little bundle of feathers with long skinny legs, and the head of a very old man.

"She told me my dreams were of the *Sabat*. She said she held *Sabats* in her courtyard, and strange things came to them, down from the sky and up out of the earth. She promised to invite me to one of her parties when I grew up. But she never did."

"You're describing a witch," Phil pointed out. "Are you serious?"

"Phil, I don't know what she was. She had a lot of occult beliefs, only not the banal, boring stuff you're always hearing from psychics. She never mentioned souls or auras or any of that crap. She thought outer space is full of wandering — well, I don't know what exactly. Little sentient whirlpools that form in the dark matter. She called them *les vagabonds*, or if she was talking English she called them drifters.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She claimed that our kind of life starts when the chemistry's right on a planet; then these things come down and enter the molecules and organize them and they begin to live. That's where we all came from originally. And she thought that when you die, unless you can find another body, you have to go back out there."

"And you believed all this stuff?" asked Phil, baffled. Of all the people on Earth he'd never have suspected of occultism, Nancy headed the list.

"I wouldn't, except for one thing," she said, lowering her voice so that Phil could hardly hear her. "I never told anybody this before. Tia got old, and all her brains didn't help her with love. Maybe the reverse. She had dozens of lovers but never kept any of them. You know, I'm the same way.

"She lived all alone while Rêve Street was turning into a free-fire zone, and she got crazier than she'd ever been — trying to brew some elixir of immortality, and I guess she had as much success as anybody else who's tried that. Meaning none at all. The last few months of her life she virtually lived in the stable, with a gasoline lantern for light and a cell phone for emergencies.

"Well, I got a call in the middle of the night. Tia was having a heart attack. She kept gasping, 'I don't want to die, *mon Dieu*, I don't want to go back out there, it's so dark and cold and I'm so afraid!'

"I threw on some clothes and drove down alone to that horrible neighborhood. I was sure I was going to be mugged or raped or something, but I had a key to the door, and while I was trying to get the lock to turn I heard something scratching on the inside. I dragged it open. The light of a streetlamp came in and a dagger of light fell on the stones, and there she was on her hands and knees, gasping and choking.

"Now I know you won't believe this, but it's true anyway.

"She looked up at me and I began having this dreadful experience, as if I was a reflection in a mirror looking back at myself. Then her face turned blue, her strength seemed to fade out, and suddenly I was me again. It wasn't until later that I realized all her efforts to save her own body had failed, so she was trying to steal mine.

"I was terribly scared, more scared than I'd ever been, but I dragged Tia into the street and slammed the door behind me. She vomited on the sidewalk and seemed to recover a little, and I was able to get her into my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

car. Christ, she smelled awful! I drove her to Charity's ER, and they saved her life, and out of gratitude she made me her heir."

"Hence La Chaumière," murmured Phil.

"Yes. She was worth millions and millions. One day a neighbor found her lying dead — she'd had a second heart attack — and as soon as I heard about it, I went right out and bought my first Jag."

"Lucky you. Now tell me what I've got in the stable."

"Phil, I honestly before Christ and Mary don't know how much of her is left. That shadow last night scared hell out of me. I used to think, well, if there's a drifter clinging to the stable as its last refuge, well, who cares. It'll fade out and vanish in time. Then we saw that thing moving around, and I was like — oh my God, what have I done, conning my poor little altar boy into living in Tia's house, in a witch's house, just for money, just for some dirty money I don't even need anymore."

Her voice sounded strained, anxious, even terrified, but her face never moved. That was when Phil realized that it was botox, that he was looking at a botox mask and not a face at all. What was really going on behind it, he didn't know — would never know.

When they were leaving La Chaumière, Nancy accepted the groveling of the waiters and the maître d' as her due. An attendant brought her car, and she climbed in and sat there checking herself in the mirror and touching her seams and the gold pin on her bosom, as if afraid something might have gotten disarranged.

Just before the window closed, she said, "That lunch is one of the best things they do, and I don't think either one of us really enjoyed it. I know I didn't."

Back home, Phil reverted to form: he decided on exorcism.

Though deeply embarrassed, he dug out his Latin missal, opened to the ritual, and spent a quarter of an hour mumbling all the traditional maledictions, cursing the *daemonium nocturnum*, the *creatura ligni*. Then added one of his own: "Out, drifter! Get the hell out! Back into the dark!"

Those words he shouted, and the echoes bounced around the courtyard and came back at him. Then, like a sensible man, he called his contractor and told him to bring a crew to demolish the stable and carry away the pieces.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Next day Phil took a few hours off from work — he had a new project going, downriver in the Bywater — to watch the process. Feeling somewhat edgy the whole time, wondering what the workmen would find.

They found nothing much. The old brick walls were solid. Under the wide pine boards of the floor were the same sort of flagstones that covered the rest of the patio, set solidly down in ancient mortar and immovable unless he wanted to bring in a jackhammer. Plus the dusty brown manure of long-vanished horses, and one rusted iron shoe with the nails still in it.

When the little building was gone, Phil relaxed. Whistling, he locked up and set out to work. That evening he had a drink at The Columns, ate dinner with a prospective client at Mr. B's Bistro, and headed home after dark.

The carriageway door, now fitted with an automatic opener, swung out to receive him. He collected his mail from an iron basket. As he drove into the patio, sensors turned lights on both there and in the house. Standing beside his Honda, Phil viewed backlit greenery and the warm crescents cast by doorway lanterns. Over the chimney pots a vast moon was rising, shedding its gold vestment, donning silver.

He relaxed, feeling more than ever at home. In the new kitchen he poured himself a glass of Syrah, sat down at a fashionable island topped with red granite slabs, and began to leaf through his mail.

A phone was blinking on the wall and he leaned over and pushed the button, half listening to the usual farrago of messages from people wanting to lend him money, clean his chimney, sheathe his house in vinyl siding, sell him retirement property, obtain his vote at the next election, and share a business opportunity too good to pass up. The phone's robot voice announced, "End of messages."

Then a throaty, almost hoarse contralto spoke up. "My poor little man," it said, "now you'll have to share your house with me."

The mail slipped from Phil's hands, the wineglass fell and shivered on the quarry-tile floor.

In the silence that followed he heard a gentle sound he couldn't identify at first: he thought of silk rubbing silk, or a snake sliding over smooth boards.

He rose trembling and followed the sound into his study. A tall figure

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stood running its fingers over the spines of his books with a gentle, slippery sound. The titles were dimly legible through its hand. Through her hand.

Tia turned and smiled. She had a wide mouth and a slash of red that might once have been lip gloss made it seem fuller than it was. Actually her lips were quite thin, intersecting the plane of her sharp face like two blades. She wore the memory of a red dress that had faded to rust.

"You're more interesting than I thought," she murmured, her voice descending another half octave into her throat. "Your love of the sacred sciences is quite unexpected."

Did the words pass through his ears or distill themselves inside his mind? The sound echoed faintly. She was approaching him now, moving at a slow regal pace like a dancer setting her feet on chalk marks. Her eyes were black. When she passed before the desk lamp its glow turned bronze.

She put out a long hand and touched his face. Like dry ice, her touch burned coldly.

"I see why she liked you," she murmured. "All roués are drawn to innocents. A fascination with virginity is the great weakness of the corrupt. Now call Nancy, and tell her to come here."

"No," he whispered. "No."

"Let me tell you how I died. One night I felt that crushing pain again. I called her. The pain got worse. I tried to reach the outside door. I was on my hands and knees when it opened, and she was standing there. Since my own body was dying I tried again to take hers. But I was weak, and she'd grown stronger, much stronger than before. She watched me die, then went away leaving the door open, so that someone else would find me.

"You'll call her now. Tell her...tell her you found my diary hidden behind the cabinet in the stable. That ought to bring her. Say it's in French, ask her to come over and help you understand it. You love her, don't you, Altar Boy?"

"Yes." Was that his own voice, coming from so far away?

"Together we'll take her unaware. Your reward will be to enjoy her body again, only this time occupied by an older and wiser *vagabond*. Oh, what things I can show you! You always wanted to know what the universe is really like, eh, eh? Well, you'll learn many things that will surprise you.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Now make the call. Listen, I've invited some friends and they're gathering."

She clapped her hands. Distantly the Rêve Street Consort began tuning up. Feet shuffled on the floor above, and in his bedroom Phil heard tiny shrieks and cries and muted laughter. A hairless something like a fetal monkey popped into the doorway, gazed at him with startled pink eyes, then swarmed up the doorframe and hung upside-down from the lintel, still staring.

Tia laughed. "How long it is since I've danced naked in the moonlight! When Nancy comes, it will be time *pendre la crèmaillére*."

"What does that mean?" asked Phil's remote voice.

"To have the housewarming," said Tia, and pointed commandingly at the phone.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WELL, WE WARNED YOU last month that the lineup for this issue wasn't certain (we thank the quantum uncertainty of David Gerrold's stories for that). So please don't flood us with letters asking what happened to the science column on Titan that we promised. It'll be in next month's issue.

Accompanying it will be lots of good fiction to celebrate our fifty-sixth anniversary. Our cover story is Peter Beagle's fabulous return to the world of *The Last Unicorn*, "Two Hearts." We'll also have a new story by Elizabeth Hand, a glimpse into the future entitled "Echo." Joe Haldeman will also be on hand with a Kuttner-esque story of today and tomorrow entitled "Foreclosure." And Terry Pratchett will make his first appearance in our pages with a bit of verse.

In the months ahead (either next month, or soon after), we'll have terrific stories from Dale Bailey, Paolo Bacigalupi, Terry Bisson, Gardner Dozois, Jeffrey Ford, Geoff Ryman, and Gene Wolfe; the stories range from kids' formic fantasies to complex portraits of the future, from pirate yarns to descents into the underworld. Expect the unexpected—you won't be disappointed! Subscribe now to make sure you won't miss any of it!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

OF MICE AND LONG-AWAITED MOVIES

GEORGE Lucas is a lucky man. Not only does he get complete control over the movies he makes, followed by a guarantee of a box office and merchandizing bonanza, he also has precious few people second-guessing him. Oh, there are a few critics who grouse a bit about his recent prequel *Star Wars* trilogy, but most of the Lucas zealots are happy just to get a new movie every three years or so. They wouldn't dare question the great man or what he does with his own characters.

Alas, the same cannot be said for the filmmakers who have the audacity to adapt a greatly beloved fictional work that is not of their own original devising. Fanatics who worship at the altar of the original author will nitpick and challenge every alteration — even before a film is released. And in such a situation, adapters face an especially tricky damned if you do/damned if you don't scenario.

If they wander too far afield of the original, the built-in fan base will denounce the film and stay away in droves. Conversely, if they are too slavish in their faithfulness to the original and lose sight of what makes an entertaining and cohesive movie for today's viewers, moviegoers unfamiliar with the source material will leave the theater grumbling and scratching their heads — sure to tell their buddies to avoid at all costs the pathetic excuse for a feature film they just endured.

The men behind the recent "Hollywood" version of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* found themselves in just such a precarious position. They faced the daunting challenge of finally bringing to cineplex audiences one of the most cherished science fiction stories of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the late twentieth century — a book that came in number four on a BBC survey of the UK's best loved novels (above all the Harry Potter novels, not to mention *War and Peace* and *David Copperfield).*

It didn't help that the book's author, Douglas Adams, had died at the young age of forty-nine while toiling in the vineyards of LaLaLand, trying to adapt his own story for the big screen (as he had been, on and off, for twenty years). His premature death insured Mr. Douglas's beatification as a minor deity, or at the very least a martyr and patron saint of absurdist sf.

Messing with his stuff took a certain amount of chutzpah!

Personally, I never quite understood what all the anticipatory angst was about. Unlike the respondents to the BBC poll, I never held *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in higher esteem than *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. To me, Douglas's novel was inspired piffle — occasionally brilliant, but more often disjointed and unfocused. Perhaps I just didn't do enough mind-altering substances at a formative age.

And I failed to see how anyone could take a purist's jaundiced view of any adaptation, no matter what form it took. Adams did the first draft before his death, after all. And, besides, the author himself had probably lost track of the "pure" version of his story. He had been reworking it himself for decades.

Discounting that first drunken vision in a field in Austria, *Hitchhiker's* first appeared as a Monty Python-ish radio series in 1978. Then came the novel, a double-LP version, a second radio series, a second book, a television series, a computer game, and so on. Adams was a master at mining his own material over and over and over again.

It's impossible to say how he would feel about this new film adaptation, of course. And as I write this, there's not even any way of knowing how the majority of *Hitchhiker's* fans will respond to it. Although I have already heard words like "disaster" bandied about by early Adamsian screeners.

Disaster? Not in my book! I'd say congratulations are due all around.

First off, the biggest danger was in making this studio film too American for its British source. This was nicely avoided. Although American Jay Roach (the Austin Powers flicks and *Meet the Parents/Fockers)* originally got the nod to direct, when he had to bow out he suggested Spike Jonze, who in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

turn suggested two British lads who had done some very creative work in commercials and music videos. Their company was called Hammer & Tongs, and their names were Garth Jennings and Nick Goldsmith.

This directing/producing team certainly brought an Anglo sensibility (as well as youthful exuberance) to the project. And this was reinforced with some apt casting.

Oh, there are Americans in the cast. But just enough to keep the movie mildly multicultural and U.S. audience-friendly. The key piece of casting was that of the mild-mannered, befuddled, and very British hero, Arthur Dent. Some talk was made of Hugh Grant in the role. (Dear me, *that* would have been a disaster!) Instead, the role went to a moon-faced young man little known in the U.S. except to fans of the original British comedy series, *The Office*. Actor Martin Freeman knows how to play farcical comedy and still maintain a whole array of very serious and realistic emotions like fear, anger, and total bafflement. And he looks adorably lumpy in his bathrobe.

Other casting choices were equally interesting. Mos Def, an African-American actor and hip hop musician, got the role of Arthur's alien pal and roving contributor to the titular galactic guide(e-)book, Ford Prefect. Zooey Deschanel plays the bright but, as always, underwritten female earthling, Trillian (nee Tricia McMillan). Ms. Deschanel's spunky waif look works well in the part. And then there is Sam Rockwell who tackles the over-the-top role of galactic prez and exuberant spaceship hijacker, Zaphod Beeblebrox. He plays it suitably maniacally as a cross between a sleazy stupid American politician (I could say who I think he had in mind, but feel free to name your own choice here) and a preening glam-rock star.

There are scene-stealing cameos worth noting, too. Amongst them, Bill Nighy (as world-builder Slartibartfast) and John Malkovich (as a cult leader written by Adams specifically for the movie). Still, my favorite performances in the film are by the non-humanoid characters. Warwick Davis provides movement and the magnificent Alan Rickman does the voice for chronically depressed robot, Marvin. There are large numbers of wonderfully creepy Vogons created by the puppetmasters at Jim Henson's Creature Shop. Lumpy, greenish and very tall, they are supposedly based on old portraits of magistrates, but they look more like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an extreme version of Charles Laughton's Hunchback of Notre Dame to me. Whatever they resemble, they are a suitably disgusting manifestation of the total bureaucrat.

And then there is the guide itself. Although there is normally nothing more annoying than repeated voiceover narration in a film, such is not the case with the animated entries from the cosmic travel compendium that are interspersed throughout the movie. In combination with the cultured voice of actor Stephen Fry, these bits add greatly to the bizarre charm of the movie and do an excellent job of capturing the tone and content of Mr. Adams's writing voice, making him a vital presence in the film.

And what can you say about the plot of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? Surely you know it. Hapless hero is about to get his house unjustly demolished, but it doesn't matter because, as his alien pub-mate tells him, the planet as a whole is scheduled for demolition. Hitching a ride on one of the wrecker spaceships, the two have a series of mishaps and adventures with new and old friends before finding out that the "mostly harmless" planet of Earth had actually been one large computer meant to help propose the proper questions to match the answer to the great Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything. (The answer being forty-two.)

As befits a story that originated as a sketch comedy radio series, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is short on cohesiveness as a fully integrated plotline. It is a succession of sketches and bits strung together. Undoubtedly, one could argue that this structure (or lack thereof) perfectly reflects the capricious chaos of a cryptic universe. Yeah, but how do you make a movie out of that?

Adams himself struggled with that one. And after his death, that Herculean task was assigned to screenwriter Karey Kirkpatrick (who wrote one of my faves, *Chicken Run*). Kirkpatrick was handed Adams's rough script, and given access to his personal computer to cull the author's other ideas. Then, the scripter had to try to superimpose a tad more structure onto the tale without wrecking the daft energy of Adams's work.

All in all, I think he succeeded. The story does bog down somewhat in the center. And the finer philosophical details might whiz by too quickly for those viewers who know nothing of Adams and his work. And then there is the pumped up love story angle. This is one device

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that might stick in the craw of those purists alluded to earlier.

Yes, I know that if you look at the total Adams oeuvre, Trillian does not turn out to be Arthur's "One." But Adams himself seems to set up the love triangle between Arthur, Zaphod, and Trillian — before completely losing interest in it. So, it is perfectly logical that Kirkpatrick would use this particular subplot to tighten up his narrative structure.

There was, however, only so much tightening that could be done with a story that boings from here to there in the universe at will. And there was only so much director Jennings and his design teams could do to physically represent the wonders and weirdness of Adams's fractured universe. I liked the fact that the filmmakers didn't fall into action movie clichés. Nor did they try to rely too heavy on CGI. The somewhat cheesy FX — like Zaphod's pop-back second head — and quite retro set-piece orientation of the movie allowed the action to stay focused on the movie's colorful (and then some) characters. And playful touches like the opening musical extravaganza of a "So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish" song choreographed with dolphin footage set the right tone for an enjoyable, if totally frivolous, movie-going experience.

All in all, I was quite pleased with the not-*too*-Hollywood movie version of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Adams (fully deified in closing space scene) might have been, too. Adams zealots might be a bit disappointed, but maybe they will be happy that the movie was, at least, finally made.

Surely this film will further the quasi-religion of Douglas Adams as a cultural guru and sf icon. And although I have never been a worshipper, I must admit that I agree with Nick Webb, Mr. Adams's friend and official biographer. In his recent book, *Wish You Were Here*, Webb observes that "once you become sensitized to forty-two, you see it everywhere."

Case in point, when I was coming home after seeing *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, I was riding on a subway car that was (as per usual) littered with copy after copy of Boston's free daily newspaper, *Metro*. There, on every cover strewn throughout the car was a large color photograph of former president Bill Clinton staring down at a Celtics jersey presented to him at a fundraising dinner in Boston the night before. And in giant numerals on the jersey was the number 42.

Spooky!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While Mr. Sterling's name will probably be associated with the cyberpunk movement forever, not all of his fiction is futuristic. His last story in our pages, "The Blemmye's Stratagem" (Jan. 2005), took us back to the Crusades, and now he gives us a fable of a timeless sort.

The Denial

By Bruce Sterling

YUSUF CLIMBED THE TOWN'S ramshackle bridge. There he joined an excited crowd: gypsies, unmarried apprentices, the village idiot, and three ne'er-do-wells with a big jug of plum brandy. The revelers had brought along a blind man with a fiddle.

The river was the soul of the town, but the heavy spring rains had been hard on her. She was rising from her bed in a rage. Tumbling branches clawed through her foam like the mutilated hands of thieves.

The crowd tore splinters from the bridge, tossed them in the roiling water, and made bets. The blind musician scraped his bow on his instrument's single string. He wailed out a noble old lament about crops washed away, drowned herds, hunger, sickness, poverty, and grief.

Yusuf listened with pleasure and studied the rising water with care. Suddenly a half-submerged log struck a piling. The bridge quivered like a sobbing violin. All at once, without a word, the crowd took to their heels.

Yusuf turned and gripped the singer's ragged shoulder. "You'd better come with me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I much prefer it here with my jolly audience, thank you, sir!"

"They all ran off. The river's turning ugly, this is dangerous."

"No, no, such kind folk would not neglect me!"

Yusuf pressed a coin into the fiddler's palm.

The fiddler carefully rubbed the coin with his callused fingertips. "A copper penny! What magnificence! I kiss your hand!"

Yusuf was the village cooper. When his barrel trade turned lean, he sometimes patched pots. "See here, fellow, I'm no rich man to keep concubines and fiddlers!"

The fiddler stiffened. "I sing the old songs of your heritage, as the living voice of the dead! The devil's crows will peck the eyeballs of the stingy!"

"Stop trying to curse me and get off this stupid bridge! I'm buying your life with that penny!"

The fiddler spat. At last he tottered toward the far riverbank.

Yusuf abandoned the bridge for the solid cobbles of the marketplace. Here he found more reasonable men: the town's kadi, the wealthy beys, and the seasoned hadjis. These local notables wore handsome woolen cloaks and embroidered jackets. The town's Orthodox priest had somehow been allowed to join their circle.

Yusuf smoothed his vest and cummerbund. Public speech was not his place, but he was at least allowed to listen to his betters. He heard the patriarchs trade the old proverbs. Then they launched light-hearted quips at one another, as jolly as if their town had nothing to lose. They were terrified.

Yusuf hurried home to his wife.

"Wake and dress the boy and girl," he commanded. "I'm off to rouse my uncle. We're leaving the house tonight."

"Oh, no, we can't stay with your uncle," his wife protested.

"Uncle Mehmet lives on high ground."

"Can't this wait till morning? You know how grumpy he gets!"

"Yes, my Uncle Mehmet has a temper," said Yusuf, rolling his eyes. "It's also late, and it's dark. It will rain on us. It's hard work to move our possessions. This may all be for nothing. Then I'll be a fool, and I'm sure you'll let me know that."

Yusuf roused his apprentice from his sleeping nook in the workshop.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He ordered the boy to assemble the tools and wrap them with care against damp. Yusuf gathered all the shop's dinars and put them inside his wife's jewelry box, which he wrapped in their best rug. He tucked that bundle into both his arms.

Yusuf carried his bundle uphill, pattered on by rain. He pounded the old man's door, and, as usual, his uncle Mehmet made a loud fuss over nothing. This delayed Yusuf's return. When he finally reached his home again, back down the crooked, muddy lanes, the night sky was split to pieces by lightning. The river was rioting out of her banks.

His wife was keening, wringing her hands, and cursing her unhappy fate. Nevertheless, she had briskly dressed the children and packed a stout cloth sack with the household's precious things. The stupid apprentice had disobeyed Yusuf's orders and run to the river to gawk; naturally, there was no sign of him.

Yusuf could carry two burdens uphill to his uncle's, but to carry his son, his daughter, and his cooper's tools was beyond his strength.

He'd inherited those precious tools from his late master. The means of his livelihood would be bitterly hard to replace.

He scooped the little girl into his arms. "Girl, be still! My son, cling to my back for dear life! Wife, bring your baggage!"

Black water burst over their sill as he opened the door. Their alley had become a long, ugly brook.

They staggered uphill as best they could, squelching through dark, crooked streets. His wife bent almost double with the heavy sack on her shoulders. They sloshed their way to higher ground. She screeched at him as thunder split the air.

"What now?" Yusuf shouted, unable to wipe his dripping eyes.

"My trousseau!" she mourned. "My grandmother's best things!"

"Well, I left my precious tools there!" he shouted. "So what? We have to live!"

She threw her heavy bag down. "I must go back or it will be too late!"

Yusuf's wife came from a good family. Her grandmother had been a landowner's fine lady, with nothing more to do than knit and embroider all day. The grandam had left fancy garments that Yusuf's wife never bothered to wear, but she dearly treasured them anyway. "All right, we'll go back together!" he lied to her. "But first, save our children!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yusuf led the way uphill. The skies and waters roared. The children wept and wriggled hard in their terror, making his burden much worse. Exhausted, he set them on their feet and dragged them by the hands to his uncle's door.

Yusuf's wife had vanished. When he hastened back downhill, he found her heavy bag around a streetcorner. She had disobeyed him, and run back downhill in the darkness.

The river had risen and swallowed the streets. Yusuf ventured two steps into the black, racing flood and was tumbled off his feet and smashed into the wall of a bakery. Stunned and drenched, he retreated, found his wife's abandoned bag, and threw that over his aching shoulders.

At his uncle's house, Mehmet was doubling the woes of his motherless children by giving them a good scolding.

AS SOON AS it grew light enough to see again, Yusuf returned to the wreck of his home. Half the straw roof was gone, along with one wall of his shop. Black mud squished ankle-deep across his floor. All the seasoned wood for his barrels had floated away. By some minor quirk of the river's fury, his precious tools were still there, in mud-stained wrappings.

Yusuf went downstream. The riverbanks were thick with driftwood and bits of smashed homes. Corpses floated, tangled in debris. Some were children.

He found his wife past the bridge, around the riverbend. She was lodged in a muddy sandbar, along with many drowned goats and many dead chickens..

Her skirt, her apron, her pretty belt and her needleworked vest had all been torn from her body by the raging waters. Only her headdress, her pride and joy, was still left to her. Her long hair was tangled in that sodden cloth like river weed.

He had never seen her body nude in daylight. He pried her from the defiling mud, as gently as if she were still living and in need of a husband's help. Shivering with tenderness, he tore the shirt from his wet torso and wrapped her in it, then made her a makeshift skirt from his sash. He lifted her wet, sagging body in his arms. Grief and shame gave him strength. He staggered with her halfway to town.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Excited townsfolk were gathering the dead in carts. When they saw him, they ran to gawk.

Once this happened, his wife suddenly sneezed, lifted her head and, quick as a serpent, hopped down from his grip.

"Look, the cooper is alive!" the neighbors exulted. "God is great!"

"Stop staring like fools," his wife told them. "My man lost his shirt in the flood. You there, lend him your cloak."

They wrapped him up, chafed his cheeks, and embraced him.

The damage was grave in Yusuf's neighborhood, and worse yet on the opposite bank of the river, where the Catholics lived. The stricken people searched the filthy streets for their lost possessions and missing kin. There was much mourning, tumult, and despair. The townsfolk caught two looters, pilfering in the wreckage. The kadi had them beheaded. Their severed heads were publicly exposed on the bridge. Yusuf knew the headless thieves by sight; unlike the others, those rascals wouldn't be missed much.

It took two days for the suffering people to gather their wits about them, but common sense prevailed at last, and they pitched in to rebuild. Wounds were bound up and families reunited. Neighborhood women made soup for everyone in big cooking pots. Alms were gathered and distributed by the dignitaries. Shelter was found for the homeless in the mosques, the temple, and the churches. The dead were retrieved from the sullen river and buried properly by their respective faiths.

The Vizier sent troops from Travnik to keep order. The useless troopers thundered through town on horseback, fired their guns, stole and roasted sheep, and caroused all night with the gypsies. Moslems, Orthodox, and Catholics alike waited anxiously for the marauders to ride home and leave them in peace.

Yusuf's wife and the children stayed at his uncle's while Yusuf put another roof on his house. The apprentice had stupidly broken his leg in the flood — so he had to stay snug with his own family, where he ate well and did no work, much as usual.

Once the damaged bridge was safe for carts again, fresh-cut lumber became available. In the gathering work of reconstruction, Yusuf found his own trade picking up. With a makeshift tent up in lieu of his straw roof,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yusuf had to meet frantic demands for new buckets, casks, and water-barrels. Price was no object, and no one was picky about quality.

Sensing opportunity, the Jews lent money to all the craftsmen of standing, whether their homes were damaged or not. Gold coins appeared in circulation, precious Ottoman sultani from the royal mint in distant Istanbul. Yusuf schemed hard to gain and keep a few.

When he went to fetch his family back home, Yusuf found his wife with a changed spirit. She had put old Mehmet's place fully into order: she'd aired the old man's stuffy cottage, beaten his moldy carpet, scrubbed his floors, banished the mice, and chased the spiders into hiding. His uncle's dingy vest and sash were clean and darned. Old Mehmet had never looked so jolly. When Yusuf's lively children left his home, Mehmet even wept a little.

His wife flung her arms around Yusuf's neck. When the family returned to her wrecked, muddy home, she was as proud as a new bride. She made cleaning up the mud into an exciting game for the children. She cast the spoilt food from her drowned larder. She borrowed flour, bought eggs, conjured up salt, found milk from heaven, and made fresh bread.

Neighbors came to her door with soup and cabbage rolls. Enchanted by her charming gratitude, they helped her to clean. As she worked, his wife sang like a lark. Everyone's spirits rose, despite all the trials, or maybe even because of the trials, because they gave people so much to gripe about. Yusuf said little and watched his wife with raw disbelief. With all her cheerful talk and singing, she ate almost nothing. That which she chewed, she did not swallow.

When he climbed reluctantly into their narrow bed, she was bright-eyed and willing. He told her that he was tired. She obediently put her cool, damp head into the hollow of his shoulder and passed the night as quiet as carved ivory: never a twitch, kick, or snore.

Yusuf knew for a fact that his wife had been swept away and murderously tumbled down a stony riverbank for a distance of some twenty arshin. Yet her pale skin showed no bruising anywhere. He finally found hidden wounds on the soles of her feet. She had struggled hard for her footing as the angry waters dragged her to her death.

In the morning she spoke sweet words of encouragement to him. His hard work would bring them sure reward. Adversity was refining his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

character. The neighbors admired his cheerful fortitude. His son was learning valuable lessons by his manly example. All this wifely praise seemed plausible enough to Yusuf, and no more than he deserved, but he knew with a black flood of occult certainty that this was not the woman given him in marriage. Where were her dry, acidic remarks? Her balky backtalk? Her black, sour jokes? Her customary heartbreaking sighs, which mutely suggested that every chance of happiness was lost forever?

Yusuf fled to the market, bought a flask of fiery rakija and sat down to drink hard in midday.

Somehow, in the cunning pretext of "repairing" their flood-damaged church, the Orthodox had installed a bronze bell in their church tower. Its clangor now brazenly competed with the muezzin's holy cries. It was entirely indecent that this wicked contraption of the Serfish Slaves (the Orthodox were also called "Slavish Serfs," for dialects varied) should be casting an ungodly racket over the stricken town. Yusuf felt as if that great bronze barrel and its banging tongue had been hung inside his own chest.

The infidels were ringing bells, but he was living with a corpse.

Yusuf drank, thought slowly and heavily, then drank some more. He might go to the kadi for help in his crisis, but the pious judge would recommend what he always suggested to any man troubled by scandal — the long pilgrimage to Mecca. For a man of Yusuf's slender means, a trip to Arabia was out of the question. Besides, word would likely spread that he had sought public counsel about his own wife. His own wife, and from such a good family, too. That wasn't the sort of thing that a man of standing would do.

The Orthodox priest was an impressive figure, with a big carved staff and a great black towering hat. Yusuf had a grudging respect for the Orthodox. Look how they'd gotten their way with that bell tower of theirs, against all sense and despite every obstacle. They were rebellious and sly, and they clung to their pernicious way of life despite being taxed, fined, scourged, beheaded, and impaled. Their priest — he might well have some dark, occult knowledge that could help in Yusuf's situation.

But what if, in their low cunning, the peasants laughed at him and took advantage somehow? Unthinkable!

The Catholics were fewer than the Orthodox, a simple people, somewhat more peaceable. But the Catholics had Franciscan monks.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Franciscan monks were sorcerers who had come from Austria with picture books. The monks recited spells in Latin from their gold-crowned Pope in Rome. They boasted that their Austrian troops could beat the Sultan's janissaries. Yusuf had seen a lot of Austrians. Austrians were rich, crafty, and insolent. They knew bizarre and incredible things. Bookkeeping, for instance.

Could he trust Franciscan monks to deal with a wife who refused to be dead? Those celibate monks didn't even know what a woman was for! The scheme was absurd.

Yusuf was not a drinking man, so the rakija lifted his imagination to great heights. When the local rabbi passed by chance, Yusuf found himself on his feet, stumbling after the Jew. The rabbi noticed this and confronted him. Yusuf, suddenly thick of tongue, blurted out something of his woes.

The rabbi wanted no part of Yusuf's troubles. However, he was a courteous man, and he had a wise suggestion.

There were people of the Bogomil faith within two days' journey. These Bogomils had once been the Christian masters of the land, generations ago, before the Ottoman Turks brought order to the valleys and mountains. Both Catholics and Orthodox considered the Bogomils to be sinister heretics. They thought this for good reason, for the Bogomils (who were also known as "Cathars" and "Patarines"), were particularly skilled in the conjuration and banishment of spirits.

So said the rabbi. The local Christians believed that the last Bogomils had been killed or assimilated long ago, but a Jew, naturally, knew better than this. The rabbi alleged that a small clan of the Old Believers still lurked in the trackless hills. Jewish peddlers sometimes met the Bogomils, to do a little business: the Bogomils were bewhiskered clansmen with goiters the size of fists, who ambushed the Sultan's tax men, ripped up roads, ate meat raw on Fridays, and married their own nieces.

Next day, when Yusuf recovered from his hangover, he told his wife that he needed to go on pilgrimage into the hills for a few days. She should have pointed out that their house was still half-wrecked and his business was very pressing. Instead she smiled sweetly, packed him four days of home-cooked provisions, darned his leggings, and borrowed him a stout donkey.

No one could find the eerie Bogomil village without many anxious

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moments, but Yusuf did find it. This was a dour place where an ancient people of faith were finally perishing from the Earth. The meager village clustered in the battered ruin of a hillside fort. The poorly thatched hovels were patched up from tumbledown bits of rock. Thick nettles infested the rye fields. The goats were scabby, and the donkeys knock-kneed. The plum orchard buzzed with swarms of vicious yellow wasps. There was not a child to be seen.

The locals spoke a Slavish dialect so thick and archaic that it sounded as if they were chewing stale bread. They did have a tiny church of sorts, and in there, slowly dipping holy candles in a stinking yellow mix of lard and beeswax, was their elderly, half-starved pastor, the man they called their "Djed."

The Bogomil Djed wore the patched rags of black ecclesiastical robes. He had a walleye, and a river of beard tumbling past his waist.

With difficulty, Yusuf confessed.

"I like you, Moslem boy," said the Bogomil priest, with a wink or a tic of his bloodshot walleye. "It takes an honest man to tell such a dark story. I can help you."

"Thank you! Thank you! How?"

"By baptizing you in the gnostic faith, as revealed in the Palcyaf Bible. A dreadful thing has happened to you, but I can clarify your suffering, so hearken to me. God, the Good God, did not create this wicked world. This evil place, this sinful world we must endure, was created by God's elder archangel, Satanail the Demiurge. The Demiurge created all the Earth, and also some bits of the lower heavens. Then Satanail tried to create Man in the image of God, but he succeeded only in creating the flesh of Man. That is why it was easy for Satanail to confound and mislead Adam, and all of Adam's heritage, through the fleshly weakness of our clay."

"I never heard that word, 'Demiurge.' There's only one God."

"No, my boy, there are two Gods: the bad God, who is always with us, and the good God, who is unknowable. Now I will tell you all about the dual human and divine nature of Jesus Christ. This is the most wonderful of gnostic gospels; it involves the Holy Dove, the Archangel Michael, Satanail the Creator, and the Clay Hierographon."

"But my wife is not a Christian at all! I told you, she comes from a nice family."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Your wife is dead."

A chill gripped Yusuf. He struggled for something to say.

"My boy, is your woman nosferatu? You can tell me."

"I don't know that word either."

"Does she hate and fear the light of the sun?"

"My wife loves sunlight! She loves flowers, birds, pretty clothes, she likes everything nice."

"Does she suck the blood of your children?"

Yusuf shook his head and wiped at his tears.

The priest shrugged reluctantly. "Well, no matter — you can still behead her and impale her through the heart! Those measures always settle things!"

Yusuf was scandalized. "What would I tell the neighbors?"

The old man sighed. "She's dead and yet she walks the Earth, my boy. You do need to do something."

"How could a woman be dead and not know she's dead?"

"In her woman's heart she suspects it. But she's too stubborn to admit it. She died rashly and foolishly, disobeying her lord and master, and she left her woman's body lying naked in some mud. Imagine the shame to her spirit! This young wife with a house and small children, she left her life's duties undone! Her failure was more than her spirit could admit. So, she does not live, but she stubbornly persists." The priest slowly dipped a bare white string into his pot of wax. "'A man may work from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done.'"

Yusuf put his head in his hands and wept. The Djed had convinced him. Yusuf was sure that he had found the best source of advice on his troubles, short of a long trip to Mecca. "What's to become of me now? What's to become of my poor children?"

"Do you know what a succubus is?" said the priest.

"No, I never heard that word."

"If your dead wife had become a succubus, you wouldn't need any words. Never mind that. I will prophesy to you of what comes next. Her dead flesh and immortal spirit must part sometimes, for that is their dual nature. So sometimes you will find that her spirit is there, while her flesh is not there. You will hear her voice and turn to speak, but there will be no one. The pillow will have the dent of her head, but no head lying there.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The pot might move from the stove to the table, with no woman's hands to move it."

"Oh," said Yusuf. There were no possible words for such calamities.

"There will also be moments when the spirit retreats and her body remains. I mean the rotten body of a woman who drowned in the mud. If you are lucky you might not see that rotten body. You will smell it."

"I'm accursed! How long can such torments go on?"

"Some exorcist must persuade her that she met with death and her time on Earth is over. She has to be confronted with the deceit that her spirit calls 'truth.' She has to admit that her life is a lie."

"Well, that will never happen," said Yusuf. "I never knew her to admit to a mistake since the day her father gave her to me."

"Impale her heart while she sleeps!" demanded the Djed. "I can sell you the proper wood for the sharpened stake — it is the wood of life, *lignum vitae*, I found it growing in the dead shrine of the dead God Mithras, for that is the ruin of a failed resurrection.... The wood of life has a great herbal virtue in all matters of spirit and flesh."

Yusuf's heart rebelled. "I can't stab the mother of my children between her breasts with a stick of wood!"

"You are a cooper," said the Djed, "so you do have a hammer."

"I mean that I'll cast myself into the river before I do any such thing!"

The Djed hung his candle from a small iron rod. "To drown one's self is a great calamity."

"Is there nothing better to do?"

"There is another way. The black way of sorcery." The Djed picked at his long beard. "A magic talisman can trap her spirit inside her dead body. Then her spirit cannot slip free from the flesh. She will be trapped in her transition from life to death, a dark and ghostly existence."

"What kind of talisman does that?"

"It's a fetter. The handcuff of a slave. You can tell her it's a bracelet, a woman's bangle. Fix that fetter, carved from the wood of life, firmly around her dead wrist. Within that wooden bracelet, a great curse is written: the curse that bound the children of Adam to till the soil, as the serfs of Satanail, ruler and creator of the Earth. So her soul will not be able to escape her clay, any more than Adam, Cain, and Abel, with their bodies made of clay by Satanail, could escape the clay of the fields and pastures.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She will have to abide by that untruth she tells herself, for as long as that cuff clings to her flesh."

"Forever, then? Forever and ever?"

"No, boy, listen. I told you 'as long as that cuff clings to her flesh.' You will have to see to it that she wears it always. This is necromancy."

Yusuf pondered the matter, weeping. Peaceably, the Bogomil dipped his candles.

"But that's all?" Yusuf said at last. "I don't have to stab her with a stick? I don't have to bury her, or behead her? My wife just wears a bracelet on her arm, with some painted words! Then I go home."

"She's dead, my boy. You are trapping a human soul within the outward show of rotten form. She will have no hope of salvation. She will be the hopeless slave of earthly clay and the chattel of her circumstances. For you to do that to another human soul is a mortal sin. You will have to answer for that on the Day of Judgment." The Djed adjusted his sleeves. "But, you are Moslem, so you are damned already. All the more so for your woman, so...." The Djed spread his waxy hands.

The rabbi had warned Yusuf about the need for ready cash.

WHEN YUSUF and his borrowed donkey returned home, footsore and hungry after five days of risky travel, he found his place hung with the neighbors' laundry. It was as festive as a set of flags. All the rugs and garments soiled by the flood needed boiling and bleaching. So his wife had made herself the bustling center of this lively activity.

Yusuf's smashed straw roof was being replaced with sturdy tiles. The village tiler and his wife had both died in the flood. The tiler's boy, a sullen, skinny teen, had lived, but his loss left him blank-eyed and silent.

Yusuf's wife had found this boy, haunted, shivering, and starving. She had fed him, clothed him, and sent him to collect loose tiles. There were many tiles scattered in the wrecked streets, and the boy knew how to lay a roof, so, somehow, without anything being said, the boy had become Yusuf's new apprentice. The new apprentice didn't eat much. He never said much. As an orphan, he was in no position to demand any wages or to talk back. So, although he knew nothing about making barrels, he was the ideal addition to the shop.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Yusuf's home, once rather well known for ruckus, had become a model of sociable charm. Neighbors were in and out of the place all the time, bringing sweets, borrowing flour and salt, swapping recipes, leaving children to be baby-sat. Seeing the empty barrels around, his wife had started brewing beer as a profitable sideline. She also stored red paprikas in wooden kegs of olive oil. People started leaving things at her house to sell. She was planning on building a shed to retail groceries.

There was never a private moment safe from friendly interruption, so Yusuf took his wife across the river, to the Turkish graveyard, for a talk. She wasn't reluctant to go, since she was of good birth and her long-established family occupied a fine, exclusive quarter of the cemetery.

"We never come here enough, husband," she chirped. "With all the rain, there's so much moss and mildew on Great-grandfather's stone! Let's fetch a big bucket and give him a good wash!"

There were fresh graves, due to the flood, and one ugly wooden coffin, still abandoned above ground. Moslems didn't favor wooden boxes for their dead — this was a Christian fetish — but they'd overlooked that minor matter when they'd had to inter the swollen, oozing bodies of the flood victims. Luckily, rumor had outpaced the need for such boxes. So a spare coffin was still on the site, half full of rainwater and humming with spring mosquitoes.

Yusuf took his wife's hand. Despite all her housework — she was busy as an ant — her damp hands were soft and smooth.

"I don't know how to tell you this," he said.

She blinked her limpid eyes and bit her lip. "What is it you have to complain about, husband? Have I failed to please you in some way?"

"There is one matter...a difficult matter.... Well, you see, there's more to the marriage of a man and woman than just keeping house and making money."

"Yes, yes," she nodded, "being respectable!"

"No, I don't mean that part."

"The children, then?" she said.

"Well, not the boy and girl, but...," he said. "Well, yes, children! Children, of course! It's God's will that man and woman should bring children into the world! And, well, that's not something you and I can do anymore."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why not?"

Yusuf shuddered from head to foot. "Do I have to say that? I don't want to."

"What is it you want from me, Yusuf? Spit it out!"

"Well, the house is as neat as a pin. We're making a profit. The neighbors love you. I can't complain about that. You know I never complain. But if you stubbornly refuse to die, well, I can't go on living. Wife, I need a milosnica."

"You want to take a concubine?"

"Yes. Just a maidservant. Nobody fancy. Maybe a teenager. She could help around the house."

"You want me to shelter your stupid concubine inside my own house?"

"Where else could I put a milosnica? I'm a cooper, I'm not a bey or an aga."

Demonic light lit his wife's eyes. "You think of nothing but money and your shop! You never give me a second glance! You work all day like a gelded ox! Then you go on a pilgrimage in the middle of everything, and now you tell me you want a concubine? Oh, you eunuch, you pig, you big talker! I work, I slave, I suffer, I do everything to please you, and now your favor turns to another!" She raised her voice and screeched across the graveyard. "Do you see this, Grandmother? Do you see what's becoming of me?"

"Don't make me angry," said Yusuf. "I've thought this through and it's reasonable. I'm not a cold fish. I'm living with a dead woman. Can't I have one live woman, just to warm my bones?"

"I'd warm your bones. Why can't I warm your bones?"

"Because you drowned in the river, girl. Your flesh is cold."

She said nothing.

"You don't believe me? Take off those shoes," he said wearily. "Look at those wounds on the bottoms of your feet. Your wounds never heal. They can't heal." Yusuf tried to put some warmth and color into his voice. "You have pretty feet, you have the prettiest feet in town. I always loved your feet, but, well, you never show them to me, since you drowned in that river."

She shook her head. "It was *you* who drowned in the river."

"What?"

"What about that huge wound in your back? Do you think I never

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

noticed that great black ugly wound under your shoulder? That's why you never take your vest off anymore!"

Yusuf no longer dared to remove his clothes while his wife was around, so, although he tried a sudden, frightened glance back over his own shoulder, he saw nothing there but embroidered cloth. "Do I really have a scar on my back? I'm not dead, though."

"Yes, husband, you are dead," his wife said bluntly. "You ran back for your stupid tools, even though I begged you to stay with me and comfort me. I saw you fall. You drowned in the street. I found your body washed down the river."

This mad assertion of hers was completely senseless. "No, that can't be true," he told her. "You abandoned me and the children, against my direct word to you, and you went back for your grandmother's useless trousseau, and you drowned, and I found you sprawling naked in the mud."

"'Naked in the mud,'" she scoffed. "In your dreams!" She pointed. "You see that coffin? Go lie down in that coffin, stupid. That coffin's for you."

"That's your coffin, my dear. That's certainly not my coffin."

"Go lie down in there, you big hot stallion for concubines. You won't rise up again, I can promise you."

Yusuf gazed at the splintery wooden hulk. That coffin was a sorry piece of woodworking; he could have built a far better coffin himself. Out of nowhere, black disbelief washed over him. Could he possibly be in this much trouble? Was this what his life had come to? Him, a man of circumspection, a devout man, honest, a hard worker, devoted to his children? It simply could not be! It wasn't true! It was impossible.

He should have been in an almighty rage at his wife's stinging taunts, but somehow, his skin remained cool; he couldn't get a flush to his cheeks. He knew only troubled despair. "You really want to put me down in the earth, in such a cheap coffin, so badly built? The way you carry on at me, I'm tempted to lie down in there, I really am."

"Admit it, you don't need any concubine. You just want me out of your way. And after all I did for you, and gave to you! How could you pretend to live without me at your side, you big fool? I deserved much better than you, but I never left you, I was always there for you."

Part of that lament at least was true. Even when their temperaments had clashed, she'd always been somehow willing to jam herself into their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

narrow bed. She might be angry, yes, sullen, yes, impossible, yes, but she remained with him. "This is a pretty good fight we're having today," he said, "this is kind of like our old times."

"I always knew you'd murder me and bury me someday."

"Would you get over that, please? It's just vulgar." Yusuf reached inside the wrappings of his cummerbund. "If I wanted to kill you, would I be putting this on your hand?"

She brightened at once. "Oh! What's that you brought me? Pretty!"

"I got it on pilgrimage. It's a magic charm."

"Oh how sweet! Do let me have it, you haven't bought me jewelry in ages."

On a sudden impulse, Yusuf jammed his own hand through the wooden cuff. In an instant, memory pierced him. The truth ran through his flesh like a rusty sword. He remembered losing his temper, cursing like a madman, rushing back to his collapsing shop, in his lust and pride for some meaningless clutter of tools.... He could taste that deadly rush of water, see a blackness befouling his eyes, the chill of death filling his lungs —

He yanked his arm from the cuff, trembling from head to foot. "That never happened!" he shouted. "I never did any such thing! I won't stand for such insults! If they tell me the truth, I'll kill them."

"What are you babbling on about? Give me my pretty jewelry."

He handed it over.

She slid her hand through with an eager smile, then pried the deadly thing off her wrist as if it were red-hot iron. "You made me do that!" she screeched. "You made me run into the ugly flood! I was your victim! Nothing I did was ever my fault."

Yusuf bent at the waist and picked up the dropped bangle between his thumb and forefinger. "Thank God this dreadful thing comes off our flesh so easily!"

His wife rubbed the skin of her wrist. There was a new black bruise there. "Look, your gift hurt me. It's terrible!"

"Yes, it's very magical."

"Did you pay a lot of money for that?"

"Oh yes. I paid a lot of money. To a wizard."

"You're hopeless."

"Wife of mine, we're both hopeless. Because the truth is, our lives are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over. We've failed. Why did we stumble off to our own destruction? We completely lost our heads!"

His wife squared her shoulders. "All right, fine! So you make mistakes! So you're not perfect!"

"Me? Why is it me all the time? What about you?"

"Yes, I know, I could be a lot better, but well, I'm stuck with you. That's why I'm no good. So, I don't forgive you, and I never will! But, anyway, I don't think we ought to talk about this anymore."

"Would you reel that snake's tongue of yours back into your head? Listen to me for once! We're all over, woman! We drowned, we both died together in a big disaster!"

"Yusuf, if we're dead, how can you be scolding me? See, you're talking nonsense! I want us to put this behind us once and for all. We just won't talk about this matter anymore. Not one more word. We have to protect the children. Children can't understand such grown-up things. So we'll never breathe a word to anyone. All right?"

Black temptation seized him. "Look, honey, let's just get in that coffin together. We'll never make a go of a situation like this, it can't be done. That coffin's not so bad. It's got as much room as our bed does."

"I won't go in there," she said. "I won't vanish from the Earth. I just won't, because I can't believe what you believe, and you can't make me." She suddenly snatched the bangle from his hand and threw it into the coffin. "There, get inside there with that nasty thing, if you're so eager."

"Now you've gone and spoiled it," he said sadly. "Why do you always have to do that, just to be spiteful? One of these days I'm really going to have to smack you around."

"When our children are ready to bury us, then they will bury us."

That was the wisest thing she had ever said. Yusuf rubbed the words over his dead tongue. It was almost a proverb. "Let the children bury us." There was a bliss to that, like a verse in a very old song. It meant that there were no decisions to be made. The time was still unripe. Nothing useful could be done. Justice, faith, hope and charity, life and death, they were all smashed and in a muddle, far beyond his repair and his retrieval. So just let it all be secret, let that go unspoken. Let the next generation look after all of that. Or the generation after that. Or after that. Or after that.

That was their heritage.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David Gerrold's new story for us is both particle and wave. His most recent novel is Child of Earth. *He reports that the movie adaptation of* The Martian Child *started shooting in May.*

A Quantum Bit Exists in Two States Simultaneously: Off

By David Gerrold

SO THERE I WAS AGAIN — sitting in a restaurant with Pope Daniel the First; this time one of the best sushi bars in Los Angeles. Also one of the most expensive. I'd only been here once before — on someone else's nickel, not mine. But this was Pope Dan's invitation and his treat. So I couldn't say no — besides, they'd throw me out of the Science Fiction Writers of America if I turned down a free meal. It's in the bylaws.

He used to be "That Pesky Dan Goodman," then he discovered religion and established his own church, a chocolate schism of a joke that began on CompuServe and ended up a legitimate faith, with genuine adherents and very serious tenets. Don't disturb The Bunny during his nap.

I sometimes wondered where Pesky's money came from; he never seemed to lack for anything, but he didn't drive either, didn't own a car, and made no secret that, like Blanche DuBois, he had always depended on the kindness of strangers. The stranger the better. He led a peripatetic life, so maybe the Pope business was more lucrative than I imagined.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He also had an unforgettable business card. "Pope Daniel the First, The Church of The Chocolate Bunny." Below that, in smaller type, his specialties: "Philosophic Surrealism, Emergency Exorcisms, Day Old Bread."

I once asked him how many emergency exorcisms he'd performed in his career. "Only one," he admitted, "but it was a nightmare." He held up a hand to stop me from making further inquiries. "Sorry, I can't discuss it. All exorcisms are confidential." Then he relented slightly. "The client had been possessed by a Hollywood lawyer gone malignant." He shuddered. "A studio lawyer." He shuddered again, this time even worse. "I won't say which studio, but it's not hard to guess. Frankly, I'm a lot happier separating a conjoined fag-hag, but...never mind; I didn't invite you here to talk shop."

"Why did you invite me?"

"A couple reasons." He twiddled his chopsticks and picked up a slice of pickled ginger. "Let's start with the invitation. Do you remember what I asked you?"

"Sure."

"Say it."

"You forgot?"

"Humor me."

"You asked me what I would do if I only had a few hours left to live. What would I choose as my last meal?"

"Right."

"So?"

"So, did you ever stop to consider how fucking *weird* that is? If you're going to execute a guy, why are you feeding him first? He's not going to have time to digest it, is he? So what's the point?"

I shrugged "I never gave it much thought." There's a lot I don't think about. But Pope Daniel does. It's always the springboard into another area of inquiry. I have to admit, he's not my favorite person. Conversations with His Holiness leave me feeling as if someone has been doing root canal on my brain.

He was already pursuing the thought — with horses, a trumpeter, and a pack of bloodhounds. "The whole point of the last meal is that it's a courtesy — we're going to kill you, but we want you to have a bit of comfort food first. And you think *I'm* surreal?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So...am I to take it from the terms of this dinner invitation that you're planning to kill me?"

"No. I don't think so. Not tonight."

The way he said it, I got the feeling that it was one of the options that had been considered and discarded, but His Holiness wasn't the easiest man on the planet to read; so I replied noncommittally, "I feel so relieved to hear that."

"To tell you the truth, that's not my style. Actually, I have something else in mind. I want to pick your brain."

"It's the one in the middle."

He ignored it. "You're my time-travel expert. Hell, you're everybody's time-travel expert — "

"Not hardly. I only wrote the one book — "

"And thirty years later, it's still in print. It's a classic. Don't pretend to be modest. Both you and I know the truth."

"Right. I'm an arrogant, self-righteous asshole."

"Yes, but you're *our* arrogant, self-righteous asshole — "

"Is that why we're here? You could have saved the time. I can get a free personality test on Hollywood Boulevard. All I need is a personality." The Scientologists had thrown me out more than once; a somewhat dubious honor, to be sure; I'd been thrown out of better places.

"It's not your lack of personality I'm interested in," said His Holiness. "I have a question for you. An inquiry. A science fictional extrapolation, if you will."

The first round of sushi arrived then. Yellowtail — with its delicate, seductive flavor, it's one of my favorites. After the first bite, I turned back to him and asked, "Okay, what's the question?"

"If you had a time machine, who would you kill?"

"You surprise me, Pesky. That's an old and tired question — so old and so tired they don't even have panel discussions on it at Worldcons anymore."

"So? Answer it anyway."

"Well, the obvious ones are Hitler and Oswald and Manson, of course. Osama, if you could find him early enough."

"Hitler and Oswald and bin Laden, I can understand. But why Manson? He's a very small potato."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That one's for a selfish reason." I admitted, "I knew one of the victims. Why do you think I wrote the damn book. It was a cry for help to the distant future: 'If someone downstream has a time machine, please come back and make it didn't happen.' The fact that we're sitting here tonight, well, that just proves to me that either time-travel is impossible, or nobody downstream cares enough about me to make the trip." I added, "Actually, I'd just as soon take out Watson, the guy who pulled the trigger; but it really doesn't matter, does it? The past is over. You can't undo it. The best you can do is learn to live with it."

"So if you could change it, you would?"

"Would I act like God? Would I take on the responsibility? Is that the point of the question?"

Pope Dan shook his head. "Not quite. That's just the starting point of the inquiry. Take the next step. Suppose you had a time machine. Suppose you had a gun with a silencer. Suppose you could find Hitler or Oswald or Manson or bin Laden *before* they did their worst. If you killed them, you'd be killing an innocent man, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not the right person to answer that question. My family lost thirty-three members to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. My grandmother's native village was leveled. That's the personal investment. But I can argue it from the altruistic position too. World War II killed thirty million people, soldiers and civilians alike. If I could save thirty million people by killing one — " I shrugged.

"But you'd still be a murderer." He said it bluntly.

"Actually, a cold-blooded murderer," I said. "Whatever my justifications, it still wouldn't excuse the act. Murder isn't altruistic. Especially not this one. It would be an act of preemptive revenge. Premeditated. So no, I would not get into heaven. If I believed in heaven, that is."

"Right. You can't escape the karmic backslash."

"Backlash," I corrected, with machine-like automaticity.

"No, I said backslash, and I meant backslash. A quantum bit exists in two states simultaneously. On\Off. It's a zen thing. Whenever you create a position, you automatically create its opposition — the opposite position. The duality is the larger whole. Except most of us get so stuck in one position that we can't own the opposite as well."

"Um — you're talking about the Tao."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm talking about *everything*. When you assert that the gostak distims the doshes," he continued, "you also create the assertion that the gostak does not distim the doshes. That's how holy wars start. You can't be on without also being off. See? On\Off — it's the karmic backslash. Here, I'll write it out for you — !"

"Never mind, I got it. So I'm a murderer and a saint at the same time?"

"No. You have the potential to be one or the other. You're both until you actualize. Until Heisenberg tries to measure either your speed or your position. Then you're whatever."

"And there's no free will?"

"There's always free will. That's God's gift to human beings. You get to choose which direction you want to go. Toward the light or away from it. It's always *your* choice."

I waited while the sushi chef set down the next course, *tekka maki*. Cold vinegared rice and raw fish, wrapped in dried seaweed.

"And all this has to do with time-travel, how?"

"Well, suppose you did have a time machine. How could you prevent these men from becoming murderers without murdering them yourself?"

"Kidnap them as babies? Take them out of their times and put them in loving foster homes, maybe...." I thought about that. "But, no — that's almost as bad. I might not be a murderer, but I'd still be a kidnapper. And I'd be bringing enormous grief to the parents and families. They don't deserve that." I stopped and looked at him. He was just pouring more hot sake into my cup for me. "Okay, I get your point. You're looking for a karmically neutral solution, aren't you?"

"Maybe," he said. "I think I have one. But I want to hear what you can create first."

"And then we'll compare notes?"

"Maybe." He grinned.

"You know what? You might be Pope, but you're still Pesky."

"Yeah? And your point is?"

I returned to the matter at hand. This time it was Spanish mackerel. This required slow, thoughtful savoring. "So, let's try this," I said. "Let's postulate that you have to find the target — the person — as an adult, after he's become an individual, acting on his own, independent and capable of free will. Right?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So far, so good."

"And in Hitler's case you offer him an art scholarship somewhere in New York; in Manson's case a music contract with any small label. That kind of thing. Something to pull them off the negative track they're on."

Pesky nodded, considering it. "That's an elegant solution, of course. Turn the negative energy into positive."

"So, problem solved?"

"No, not quite. Hitler was a lousy artist. And when Manson started to sing, trains would take dirt roads to get away. So where would you find a school to invest in Hitler, or a recording label to invest in Manson?"

"Well, if you're a time-traveler, you could — "

Pesky cut me off. "No. Even if you set up your own scholarship foundation, your solution requires what would very quickly turn into a prohibitive investment of time and money. Someone has to remain onsite to make sure the solution works. That means setting up a permanent monitoring team. No, what I'm looking for is a one-time, non-destructive, karmically neutral termination of the threat."

"All right, yeah. I see what you're looking for. The one single action you can do in the past that will change the present. Got it."

"Termination of the individual isn't an option. And let's say I don't have the resources to set up scholarships and recording contracts and other diversions. What else can I do?"

"Well, how about extraction? Send them to Coventry? Some kind of exile?"

"That's still kidnapping. It's not karmically neutral, is it?"

I frowned. "You're making this harder than it needs to be, you know."

"No, you are."

"Eh?"

"You're the one who doesn't want to be a murderer. I assume then, by extrapolation, that you don't want to be a kidnapper either. Or anything else that compromises your integrity."

"Yeah. You got it. Just because the other guy wants to wallow around in a moral gutter doesn't mean that I have to get down there with him and wallow too. Remember that line from Gandhi? 'In this cause, I too am prepared to die, but my friends, there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill.' Well, that's me. I have to protect what's left of my integrity ferociously, because I have so little."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pope Dan went thoughtful at that. As if I'd said something wrong, something that disturbed his whole train of thought. He emptied his wine cup and refilled it. "Let me try another tack," he said. "Let's go back to those guys you named. Hitler, Oswald, Manson, bin Laden. What do they all have in common?"

"Um, well, for one thing — they're fanatics."

"And — ?"

"If a fanatic is willing to sacrifice his own life for a cause, then he's just as willing to sacrifice your life too."

"Ah. Yes. So, you're saying that you're not a fanatic?"

"Well, I'm fanatic about...." I stopped, considered. "No. I'm not a fanatic. Not about anything anymore. At least, I don't think I am. I'm not sure I've ever been tested. No, wait. I'm fanatic about the Constitution. The ideas it stands for. That the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, must be accountable *to* the people."

"Nice line."

"Thanks."

"So you're fanatic about the principles of freedom."

"Yeah, I guess I am. The right to be unpopular. I've had a lot of experience with that one."

"Yes, that's obvious. So...." He twirled his wine cup thoughtfully. "Would you kill to protect the Constitution?"

"Um — " Oops.

"Would you?"

"Uh — "

"Would you...?"

"All right, all right. I see your point. So I'm not Gandhi."

"Nobody is. Even Gandhi wasn't Gandhi. He just had better P.R. than you. The question, my dear, isn't whether you're a fanatic. The question is how fanatic you are."

"I don't follow — "

"Gandhi was a fanatic. So was Dr. King. They were fanatics for peace, just like some people are fanatics for war. Fanatics of any kind are dangerous. Even fanatics for peace. Jesus was a fanatic for peace and look how many wars have been waged in his name. Fanatics get in the way of rational people sitting down at the table and creating partnerships. How

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can you reach consensus if you have a fanatic in the room? Any kind of fanatic."

"I'm sorry. You're confusing me. Are you equating Hitler with Gandhi? Jesus with Manson?

"No. I'm talking about that specific kind of single-minded, all-consuming, jackass-stubborn, ruthless determination toward a result that steamrollers over everything in its path — what we call 'evil' except when we agree with it. Jesus and Gandhi had it. So did Hitler and Manson. The difference was the underlying intention."

I put my chopsticks down. "I liked you better when you were only selling day-old bread."

"Too much competition from Safeway. Besides, the Pope business pays better. It's all that tithing, you know." He waved the thought away. "Let's get back to Hitler. Or anyone else. Jesus, Manson, Gandhi, whoever. Let's say you can meet him as an adult — but before he does any real damage. You have a gun in your pocket. You can kill him. But you don't want to kill him — not for his sake, but for yours. You don't want any man's death on your conscience. It's the John Donne thing. Don't ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee. You have an hour, maybe less, maybe more. Do you think you could talk a madman or a fanatic out of his vision?"

I cupped my hands, almost in a praying gesture, and breathed into them while I considered the question. *The question*. "You know as well as I do, every question determines its own answer. And the way you phrased that question...well, no. You can't talk a madman out of anything. He's mad. He's a fanatic. It's in the definition of the word. So, no, I don't think so."

"All right, try it this way. Let's say I'm from the future. Let's say you're Hitler or Manson or some other whackadoodle. You haven't whacked the national doodle yet. Let's say I take you out to dinner, just like this, and let's say I engage you in a conversation, just like this, and let's say, I ask you what you're fanatic about — just like this. And let's say you admit that you're fanatic about getting the British out of India or civil rights for blacks or restoring the glory of the Fatherland or starting a race war or punishing the Great Satan or even protecting the Constitution of the United States of America; it doesn't matter, one's as good as the other, but let's say that I'm a time-traveler and you're a potential disaster for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

human race. Do you think I could talk you out of your vision? Your commitment? Your blind, stubborn belief that you know the answer better than anyone else?"

"The way you just phrased it? No. Why should I believe you? What proof can you give me that you're from the future? What proof can you give me that I'm going to have that kind of impact in the world? And if you did show me convincing proof that I was responsible for a new religion or a holy war or some other colossal human disaster, I'm not sure that would deter me. It might inspire me all the more. Wow, look how successful I'm going to be!"

"Right. That one isn't karmically neutral either, is it?" He refilled my wine cup, then his. I got the feeling he was just warming up. "Okay, let's try it another way. Let's say I'm still a time-traveler from the future. Let's say I take you out to dinner. Let's say I give you this thought experiment — not just because I want to exercise our mutual ability to take an idea and beat it to death, but because I have a choice. I can act willfully, or I can let you make the choice yourself."

The wine in my cup had suddenly gone cold. I put it back down on the counter of the sushi bar. "Y'know, Pesky. I'm really not comfortable where this conversation is headed. I really did like you better when you were only selling bread. Maybe we should call it a night — " I started to excuse myself.

He put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me back down onto my stool. With his other hand he pulled his coat back just a bit — just enough to reveal the gun in his under-the-shoulder holster. It was a very thin, very flat-looking weapon. And very dangerous-looking too.

I sat.

"Pesky?" I leaned in close to him and whispered. "Just as a point of information — which one of us is the madman here?"

"Neither. I hope," he said. "Just hear me out, okay?"

"Okay."

He signaled for another bottle of hot sake. I waved to the sushi chef. Spicy tuna hand roll. What the hell. I turned back to His Holiness, Pope Daniel the First of The Church of the Chocolate Bunny. Whatever other identities he had, they were still unknown to me.

"You say you love the Constitution of the United States of America."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I nodded.

"You would kill to protect it?"

I nodded again. "Yes. In certain circumstances."

"Would you die to protect it?"

I took a breath. "Yes. If I were certain that my death would ensure its survival."

"You're sure about that."

"Yes."

"What if I said you didn't have to die — just give up something you love?"

"What...?"

He was looking into his wine cup, as if looking for courage; he put it back down, then turned to face me directly. "What if I asked you to leave America, to never write another word of any kind — not even an e-mail. No articles, no stories, no books, no columns. Not even your blog. What if I told you that you could ensure the survival of your nation by giving up writing?"

"Uh — " Not an easy question to consider. I turned it over a few times, held it up to the light and looked for the secret message. "I'll admit it, writing isn't the easiest thing in the world — you sit alone in a room and talk to yourself. You listen to hear if you say anything worth repeating. You type up the good stuff. On paper the pauses don't show. Then you make other people pay for the privilege of reading it; that's how you prove you're not crazy. But it's lonely work. I wouldn't mind giving it up. Except — "

"Except what?"

"Except I'm good at it. Maybe it's the only thing I'm good at. If I quit writing, how would I make a living?"

"You could teach, you could counsel, you could be a trainer, you could do stand-up, you could even try panhandling — "

"No," I said. "I'm not sure I could give up writing. It'd be a kind of soul-death. Can't we compromise? What if I promised not to sell anything? I'd keep it all to myself, a private journal, like Emily Dickinson — "

"No, you couldn't do that. Your ego wouldn't allow it. You love the audience attention too much."

"You're right about that. So what does that mean — that you have to shoot me now?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No. Of course not. That's not karmically neutral. Besides, I almost like you."

"The feeling is almost mutual. So what's the answer?"

"You said it yourself, a little while ago. Extraction. The only question is whether or not the extraction is voluntary. How much do you love your country?"

"There are days when my patience is tested. But that's politics, not people. I lived in Ireland for a year, that was a long time ago, but it was a very bad time for me personally. I was alienated and bitter and cynical about everybody and everything — and for good reason. It was a rough time, not just for me but for everyone — the whole country. But I remember when I finally came back to the States, I looked down out of the window of the airplane and I saw the Statue of Liberty. I surprised myself. I got this hot feeling inside. And my throat choked up. And I could feel tears in my eyes. Because whatever else was going on, this was my home — "

"Would you give up your country to save it? Would you?"

"I don't know. I suppose if I really believed you. But I'd have to be convinced. I mean, *really* convinced."

"So you want proof?"

"I guess so, yes."

"You're clear that's what you're asking for? Proof that you have the potential to destroy the thing you love the most?"

"Yes. That's what I'm asking for."

"All right." He fumbled in his coat pocket —

The island is actually kind of nice. The weather is hot and tropical, but we get cooling rains every afternoon about three or four. There are several settlements; that's because some of the folks here don't want to have anything to do with some of the other folks here. I know, I feel that way about a few. But none of us have any real contact with the outside world. We're all in this together. We get books and movies and even some television, but no current events. It's kind of like an extended vacation.

And I can write. All I want.

I just can't publish.

I'm not happy about that, but you should be grateful.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction
MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 96 page Catalog. $5.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

16-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $4.00 or $36 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

Spiffy, jammy, deluxy, bouncy—subscribe to Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. $20/4 issues. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Ave., Northampton, MA 01060.

ENEMY MINE, All books in print. Check: **www.barryblongyear.com**

Out of Texas by James Hold: A cat turns itself human, battles a giant cabbage, and foils a fiendish plot to destroy the state. *www.iUniverse.com*

ARDATH MAYHAR NOVELS (o/p or unpublished) can be found at Renaissance E Books (*www.renebooks.com*); *www.alexlit.com*; *www.stonedragonpress.com*; *www.imagesco.com/print.html*. Some titles are available from the author via ardathm@netdot.com

Read *Oracle and Other Stories* by W. Strawn Douglas at *www.authorhouse.com*. Available as both E-book and print.

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Including some collector's items, such as the special Stephen King issue. Limited quantities of many issues going back to 1990 are available. Send for free list: F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

www.canadianknights.com
Online Sci-Fi and Fantasy Magazine seeking submissions

Now available! *Fourth Planet from the Sun*—stories of Mars from *F&SF*. Varley, Zelazny, Bradbury, more. Signed by the editor. $17.95 postpaid from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

Abundant wit. The F&SF contests, 1971-1993, are collected in *Oi, Robot*, edited by Edward L. Ferman. Contributors include Joe Haldeman, Pat Cadigan, more. $11.95 postpaid from F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

MISCELLANEOUS

William Gibson: No Maps for These Territories, a documentary by Mark Neale: *www.docurama.com*

If stress can change the brain, all experience can change the brain. *http://www.undoingstress.com*

The Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley Award for Imaginative Fiction is open for submissions! Deadline is 10/1/05. For more info, see *www.rsbd.net*.

Catch Mary Rosenblum teaching at the 2005 Willamette Writers Conference Aug. 5-7, 2005. *http://www.willamettewriters.com/*

FREE GAME CATALOG! CREATIVE ENTERPRISE, PO BOX 297702, COLUMBUS, OH 43229.

FOUND: You left your cell phone in the visitor's center at Zion National Park. Please call me to retrieve it—I've been getting weird messages since I picked it up. 555-2424. Ask for Bob.

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $1.50 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

THE UNFORTUNATE FURSEY AND *THE RETURN OF FURSEY*, BY MERVYN WALL (1946/1948)

THE IRISH monastery of Clonmacnoise has long been free from demonic attack, but when its defenses are finally breached, it is discovered that the Forces of Darkness are taking refuge in the cell of Brother Fursey, whose stammer prevents him from reciting the necessary exorcisms. So Fursey is cast out, a supernatural horde trailing behind him. When he takes shelter with a widow, propriety demands that he marry her. But she is a witch and Fursey accidentally acquires her powers. Now a sorcerer, albeit an incompetent one, whose sole trick is tossing a rope over a beam to produce a mug of beer, he is feared throughout Ireland, pursued by the Church, and defended in court by the Devil himself.

In the second volume, Fursey despairs of being reconciled with the Church and embraces wickedness. Alas, he is unequal to the task, too squeamish to allow Albert, his long-suffering familiar, even a drop of his blood, not quite up to murder, and an embarrassment at the Sabbat.

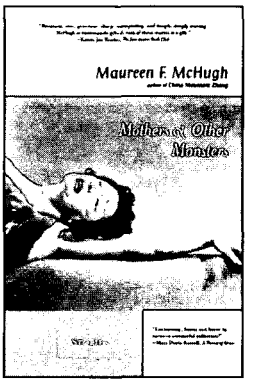
Synopsis cannot do these books justice. They are masterpieces of comic fantasy, full of barbed satire and, ultimately, heart-rending tragedy, as lovable, sad Fursey simply cannot find a place for himself, either among the forces of Light or those of Darkness. They are as good as T. H. White, better than Cabell, utterly unique. Wall (1908-1995) was an Irish playwright, novelist, and civil servant, well-known in Irish literary circles, but, alas, yet undiscovered by fantasy readers in general. These books are treasures.

—Darrell Schweitzer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mothers & Other Monsters

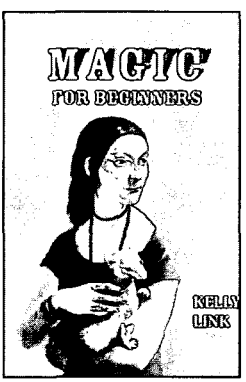
Maureen F. McHugh



In her luminous, long-awaited debut collection, Maureen F. McHugh (*China Mountain Zhang*) wryly and delicately examines the impacts of social and technological shifts on families. Includes stories from *F&SF* and the Hugo Award-winner "The Lincoln Train."

"Enchanting, funny and fierce by turns—a wonderful collection!"—Mary Doria Russell, *A Thread of Grace*

$24 · 1931520135



MAGIC FOR BEGINNERS

KELLY LINK

Author of
Stranger Things Happen

❋

Illustrated by
Shelley Jackson

$24 · 1931520151

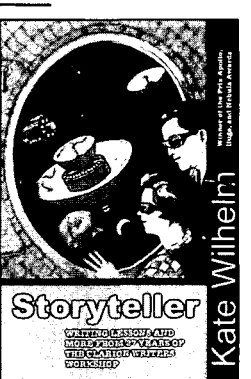
Link's engaging, funny stories riff on haunted convenience stores, husbands and wives, rabbits, zombies, weekly apocalyptic poker parties, witches, superheroes, marriage, and cannons. *Magic for Beginners* includes three new stories, as well as stories from *Conjunctions, The Dark,* and the Hugo Award-nominee, "The Faery Handbag" from *The Faery Reel.*

Storyteller

Kate Wilhelm

Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of The Clarion Writers' Workshop

Part memoir, part writing manual, this affectionate history of the Clarion Worskshop explains why participants feared red pencils* and rejoiced at the sight of water guns; what Wilhelm learned; and how she and Damon Knight passed a love of writing onto generations of writers. A gift to all writers, *Storyteller* includes a section of writing exercises and advice.



* See page 121 for the origins of "The Red Line of Death."

$16 · 193152016X

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALBERT E. COWDREY

an exciting new voice in science fiction

CRUX

A war for the future sends time travellers to the past and into a world of intrigue in Albert E. Cowdrey's debut novel of satire, schemes, and adventure.

"Albert E. Cowdrey has been chief of the Special History Branch of the U.S. army.... Now he gives us his first SF novel, *Crux*, with excellent results."
—*ANALOG*

"Albert Cowdrey made himself a lot of new fans when he turned his talents to science fiction."
—*FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE*

"Cowdrey...takes his reader on an exciting ride.... [He] weaves a tale of human sin...that blends realistically with the characters' love and honor in this fast-paced, easy-reading book."
—*TULSA WORLD*

0-765-31037-6 • $24.95/$34.95
Now in hardcover

TOR
www.tor.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED